

JEHU POOLE

C. Q.
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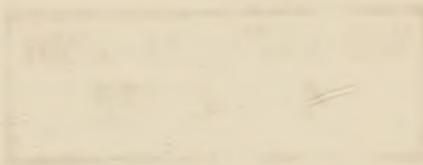
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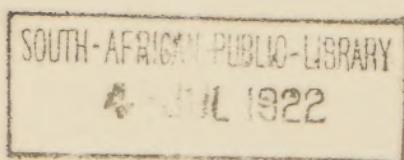
BY

F. HARNHAM DORSET



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LEONARD PARSONS, LTD.

TO

THE BEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD

DEAR LITTLE MOTHER,

Once upon a time there was a child who had the best mother that ever was. She was a pretty little woman, very wise, and supremely loving. She lived in a cottage, and the child built her palaces . . . in the air.

One day the child grew up, wrote a book, and found a publisher who would print that book. Now sometimes, (though rarely), palaces are built upon royalties, wherefore, Little Mother, sit down and "cross your thumbs" and wish luck to the foundation of your aerial palace.

Your devoted Son,

F.H.D.



JEHU POOLE

CHAPTER I

“ JEHU, thou son of Nimshi, drive not so furiously ! ”

“ Jeroboam, thou son of Nebat, stand out of my way ! ”

The first speaker, Master Stephen King, landlord of the “ Three Crows ” inn of Muckleford, in Dorsetshire, leapt aside as he shouted his pleasantry, while a country cart, empty of all save its driver, swung recklessly out of the inn court-yard in the wake of a big-boned brown horse with an evil eye.

It was eight o’clock of a late September evening, quiet and clear, with a suspicion of frost in the air which lent an additional sharpness to every sound. Muckleford was already settling down for the night, so that Jehu Poole, of the Downs Farm, a homestead nine miles out of the little town, had the cobbled High Street to himself. The inn-keeper apostrophized his method of progress in one trenchant word, and then turned about to attend to his own business. His tapster, Jemmy Heal, who had served him faith-

fully for a round twenty years and had witnessed Mr. Poole's comings and goings weekly for the last ten, sucked in the night air expressively through a gap in his front teeth, but proffered no further comment.

Muckleford, in the Year of Grace seventeen hundred and thirty-five, was the counterpart of many another small township along the coaching roads of England. At the top of the High Street, set upon a hill, a Norman church dominated the view. At the bottom an old Tudor building, now the hostelry of the Three Crows, welcomed jaded travellers and despatched them, refreshed, upon their way to Dorchester. Between these two points a jumbled medley of gabled roofs, timbered house-fronts, and diamond panes, bore testimony to the age and prosperity of the quiet place. Over all hung two pungent odours, the one of Stephen King's brewery and the other of Elihu Burbage's tannery-yard. Peace and respectability pervaded the atmosphere with an incense of hops and hides, and into it burst the voice and vehicle of Jehu Poole.

Jehu Poole was thirty-six, grandson of a scholar and son of a free-lance soldier of fortune turned farmer; and he was in some respects an example of the law of reversion to type. Within him the man of letters and the man of adventure waged war, and when the strife, as now, swayed unevenly, he sought for relief, not in strong liquor, but in song and speed. He sat on the precarious seat of his cart, with his feet firmly braced and his big person further enlarged by a caped

coat and a felt hat, the latter tied on with a kerchief passed over its crown and knotted beneath his chin. Looming grotesquely in the dusk he drove as though for a wager, and further enlivened the evening with staves of melody, whistled and sung, which betrayed an acquaintance with the London Opera-house, oddly at variance with his present situation and appearance. His horse, apparently, was used to these proceedings, for it took the road at a hand-gallop and yet gauged to a nicety the space required to carry the cart safely past a deserted waggon, which stood at the foot of the hill in the narrow street. Poole himself made no attempt to guide him.

Once free of the town and clear of the stone bridge which spanned the river, man and horse, at that twilit hour, seemed to have the world to themselves. The mysterious loveliness of a coming moon penetrated the dusk with a fantasy of faint light. The hedgerows sped away on either hand as though startled by the noisy advent, but presently all sound became subdued by the great stillness of open downland, and as the road began to rise and the pace of the brown horse slackened, Jehu's song dropped away to silence, and he sat like a man plunged deep in reverie. At the top of a long hill overhanging the farm the horse stopped as though by habit, and its driver, drawing a deep breath, sat looking out over an expanse of dusky down and faintly gleaming road.

Presently, moving across a grey field to the left

of the cart, came the stout figure of a man, which, after negotiating a stile with some difficulty, climbed over into the road. Man and horse shook themselves out of their spell of meditation, and gave the newcomer greeting, the former by the offer of a large hand, and the latter by laying back his ears and kicking. The fat man accepted the hand, avoided the heels, and climbed to a seat beside the driver with an ill-humoured grunt.

“Nothing doing to-night, Will?” inquired Jehu, after a second’s expectant pause.

“Nowt,” replied the stout man. “McQueen’s men nosin’ round like bees. Damned if it’s get-ting worth the trouble for a few kegs.”

“Mebbe not,” agreed Jehu, “and now, since you have mentioned it, I do not mind telling you that this is my last trip for the business. I dis-solved the partnership with King to-night.”

“Eh, and why?” William Quent twisted himself round in a vain attempt to see his friend’s face clearly beneath the shade of the bent hat.

“Well,” replied Jehu slowly, as though con-sidering his words, “a man thinking of marriage with an exciseman’s adopted daughter finds his point of view altering altogether over the contra-band trade.” He smiled whimsically under cover of the shadow, and flicked up the horse to a trot. The farmhouse lights began to appear as the cart turned the corner of the hill.

Mr. Quent struck a fat hand upon a fat thigh and sighed noisily.

“Miss Miriam?” he inquired.

“The same.”

“ Fixed? ”

“ Not yet. I’d no particular fancy to go courting McQueen for his niece until this business was closed up. And, by the same token, King told me that he was supping at the Crows, when I left there just now. In any case, as you said, the contraband here is hardly worth the risk of running it, and I’ve had enough of the game.”

“ And made enough at it, too, I’ll be bound,” replied Quent, drily. “ I never could understand you, Jehu. Allus on the look-out for danger and into it at once from a lad, as though for the sport alone, and then on a sudden turning prudent and clearin’ out with a pocket full of profit, be it bird’s eggs or guineas.”

Jehu laughed softly and turned his horse’s head in at the rick-yard gate.

The Downs Farmhouse sat squarely back against a rising meadow, an old beetle-browed house stationed behind a patch of garden and orchard, flanked on one side by a rick-yard, into which the kitchen door opened, and on the other by a cow-yard, across which dairy and byre faced each other, with a mutual view of the manure heap.

As the cart came to a standstill before one of the stables, the kitchen door swung open, revealing a warm flood of light, and silhouetted against it the bent figure of a small woman. A cracked voice greeted the men.

“ That you, Jehu? ”

“ Right, mistress.”

“ Willy-iam with ’ee? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Umph! ”

The figure retreated into the glowing kitchen, and Jehu, lighting a stable lantern from a smaller one which hung from his cart, fell to unbuckling the harness. Quent unfastened the stable, picked up the lantern, and presently led the way into a warm aromatic atmosphere of hay and horses. Jehu stabled his steed in the nearest loose-box, stood for a moment caressing the rat-like ears, and then rejoined his companion who stood, prudently, outside the box.

They passed out, locked the door, and trundled the cart to its resting-place beneath a part-house; then turned towards a cheerful blaze of light, combined with an odour of cooking steak.

CHAPTER II

THE woman who stood awaiting them by the great fireplace of the Downs Farm kitchen presented a strange contrast to both Jehu and his friend.

Lilian Poole, distant cousin, and housekeeper at the farm ever since the death of Mrs. Oliver Poole, an event which had taken place in Jehu's early childhood, had never been a tall woman. Age, added to past experience of bitter hardship, had now twisted her into the semblance of a goblin, but her great blue eyes, curiously set in the midst of minute wrinkles, her whimsical though all but toothless mouth, and the fine texture of her creased skin, all spoke of a delicate charm, which, however early blighted, had left upon her its indelible mark.

The family of Poole had suffered many vicissitudes ever since the days of one Hilary, who, as a printer and publisher, had attained to a moderate fame in the regions of Fleet Street. He was a man of learning and substance, and withal of good quality, but, unluckily for his personal interests, too keenly interested in men

matters and politics to keep the seething ferment of unrest which preceded the Civil War from sullying his fair reams of paper. His titled patrons disowned him hurriedly, his press was confiscated by the officials of the Crown, and Hilary Poole, with his two sons, sought for revenge in buff and steel. One only of the three returned to the old house by the Fleet, a crippled younger son with a patient wife and one child, a boy.

The boy, Oliver, grew up, wearied of his father's caustic tongue and narrow means, joined the Army and went abroad for service in Holland. At the conclusion of peace with that country, he wandered as a free lance through Europe, returning at last, the reputed widower of a Frenchwoman, to find the old home swept away, and almost as little trace of his family remaining as if it had never existed.

However, a man with money in his pockets need not lack friends. At the end of a couple of years Oliver had progressed so far in the goodwill of a wealthy wool-stapler that he had married that merchant's daughter and become master of the Downs Farm, with a good many acres of the finest grazing land in that part of the country.

Of all his relations Lilian had been the only one whom Oliver Poole had been able to trace after his return to England, and he had found her, the newly made widow of as brutal a specimen of manhood as the neighbourhood of the Fleet could produce, in a crazy tenement off Ram Alley. She was then a woman of thirty,

twisted and marred by ill-usage, silent, caustic, capable, who had found in the farmstead a veritable haven of refuge. After Mrs. Oliver's death Lilian reigned supreme, avoiding her own sex as much as possible, and acting the part of a strange, and not altogether unsatisfactory, substitute for a mother to little Jehu.

Freed from his heavy coat and eccentric head-gear, Jehu Poole now stood forth in the fire-light as a remarkably well-figured man. At no distant date Nature plainly intended him to develop the silhouette of his fore-fathers, but for the present he towered above his company with the easy grace of excellent proportion. His flaxen-brown hair grew to his shoulders, and was then cut square after a waning fashion. Its thick bushy masses framed a clean-shaven, high-nosed visage, lit by a pair of bright gipsy-black eyes, and a trifle marred by an over-pugnacious jaw. For the rest, his well-worn brown suit had never been cut by a country tailor, and the plain white neck-cloth at his throat was of fine quality.

Beside the two men there was no other inhabitant of the kitchen at that hour, but Lilian. The maids who attended to house and dairy were already a-bed under the eaves, and Mrs. Lilian, having set out the supper upon a round table drawn up to the fireplace, bid William and Jehu a brief "Good-night," and departed herself.

William Quent subsided comfortably into an elbow chair, and helped himself from a convenient jug of ale. Jehu, standing on the oppo-

site side of the hearth with his back to the blaze and his hands behind him, nodded encouragingly at the dish of steak, and requested his friend to help himself. Quent, however, demurred.

“For God’s sake, man, zit ‘ee down like a Christian!” he said, irritably. “I can no more talk to ‘ee cricking my neck up’ards than I can eat my supper, and I’ll remind you that thik little bit of business gave me an eight-mile walk ower the rabbit-holes for nowt.”

“I’ll sit down in a moment, Will,” answered his host, turning about in order to thrust a large foot close to the flames. “I’d like to know your opinion of my aspiration first.”

“Opinion!” William cut himself a slice of steak with a gesture of scorn. “If I thought any opinion of mine would make any differ’ to you mebbe I’d give ‘ee one. As ‘tis, I’ll keep it to myself.”

“No, but listen, man.” Jehu faced his friend again, and, drawing up a chair, leant earnestly across the table. “Listen a minute and then tell me your real mind. Think of Miss Miriam, and then say if you think I am like to be the man for her.”

Quent lifted a pair of penetrating eyes from his plate and studied his friend with frank surprise.

“Good land, lad!” he exclaimed. “What bee is this, now? Who should know but herself? She’s an odd lass and you’re an odd yellow, so you’re as like to vit each other as most folk. Why

ask me when your mind is made up, and all the opinions in the world wouldn't budge 'ee?"

"My mind," said Jehu, making a miniature see-saw of his forefinger and a fork, "is made up as far as the asking goes. It is merely that I've a fancy to know your view of my chances. McQueen has no great liking for me, and, mind you William, I've had so little to do with women that I have no notion how she regards me."

"She's known you a good spell."

"Ay, that's it! There's nothing fresh about me, and, to tell the truth, Will, it is only this last six months that I woke up, so to speak, and saw her."

"Look here, Jehu,"—William emphasized his coming remarks by clinking a knife impatiently against a tumbler—"you'm a zensible enough fellow most ways, but here you'm a born fool. Miss Miriam ain't even McQueen's own daughter. Lord knows he ain't got nothing to leave her. She's half French, a bit book-larned for a woman, and looks more of a leddy than Squire's wife. Think she wants to zpend all her bit of life down here? You go about it the right way and you'll get her. Take the lass to Lunnon now and again, give her a bit more life, teach her to zing, and she'll be happy enough with you. You'm the only man of the neighbourhood with the money or the brains to do it. She may curtsey to the gentlefolk but she don't forget that her mother was a French leddy and their equal, just as you, man, are a gentleman."

Jehu was silent for a moment, as though

weighing his friend's argument. A faint cloud had settled on his face. He wanted the woman of his choice at any price, but none the less he did not altogether relish this view of himself in the light of a forlorn hope. He roused himself at length with a laugh, and fell to upon his neglected supper, much to William's relief.

"Well, Will," he said, meeting a second shrewd glance, "by next week all my connection down there," nodding backward toward the road, "will be wound up and ended. Then I shall try my luck. The worldly side of the affair should appeal to McQueen, at any rate."

"No doubt of it, and no questions asked, either," replied Quent, who was rapidly becoming more sociable under the influence of food and fire. He relapsed into a more amiable silence, and soon the two men turned their chairs to the blaze, lit their pipes, and sat quiet in a companionable atmosphere of tobacco smoke.

The silence was broken suddenly by a sound of galloping hoofs upon the highway, stopping abruptly at the gate, and followed by a clatter in the yard without. Jehu roused himself from a dozing reverie, and opened the door just as a figure upon the step raised a hand to knock.

The newcomer was a lad of about seventeen, who stood blinking and white-faced in the sudden illumination, but found tongue before Jehu had time to speak.

"Plaze, zur, can 'ee coom up along the road wi' I and bring zummon with 'ee?" he asked,

breathlessly. "Mr. McQueen's lying murthered half a mile on."

"Good God! *What?*"

"Mr. McQueen, zur. I were zent oot to meet un wi' a message vrom th' Squire, and I met his harse vurst and then found him lying face doon i' th' road. He've abin shot through th' back, vor zure."

By this time William had joined the pair of them on the doorstep. He reached down the lantern from its nail and re-lit it, while Jehu, after a moment's thought, strode over to an out-house and dragged out a hurdle.

"Ride back and wait there," he ordered the lad. "We'll follow. The men have gone home. Wait. Take this, and try if there is any life left in him." He opened a small cupboard and handed out a flask, which the lad seized as he vanished into the night.

William, meantime, had taken down a spare coat from a row of pegs near the door, and now stood waiting, lantern in hand, for the next move.

Jehu shook himself into his many-caped garment with a kind of plunge, rammed on his hat, and led the way, still in silence, out on to the road.

The moon by this time was clear and bright, and a lantern was hardly needed. Quent, fully occupied in keeping pace with his friend's stride, had no breath left to spare for any remarks, had he wished to make them. They sped along in the wake of the distant hoof-beats, Jehu with the

hurdle hoisted on his broad shoulder, William clasping the trailing coat and swinging lantern.

At length the hoof-beats stopped, and a while later the two friends came up to a little group consisting of a lad, a horse, and a crumpled black object which lay upon the highway.

There was no room for doubt. Mr. McQueen was dead, as dead as a bullet fired at close quarters through his heart could make him. It scarcely needed the lantern or the white peering face of the moon to show them that, for the body was already stiff and cold.

A few seconds passed in vain endeavour to discover some spark of life in the helpless figure; then Jehu raised himself from the hopeless task and stood frowning perplexedly.

“ You are Andrew Prowse, new back from Poole? ” he asked the youth, and, in reply to his nod, “ I thought so, but it is three years since I saw you last. Did you meet anyone on your way here first? ”

“ Not a zoul, zur, ” replied Andrew. “ Whoever killed un must ‘a cleared oot ower th’ downs.”

The point at which they stood was on the level road nearly a mile past the farmstead. On either side, behind low hedges, stretched open downland, without wood or thicket near to offer concealment to any murderer. Jehu stooped again and felt the body.

“ This beats me, Will, ” he said, without look-

ing at the other's face. "He must have been dead at least two hours, and we only reached home little over an hour ago. King told me that he was in his parlour when I left the Crows about eight o'clock, yet I should think he must have been shot soon after, to be like this."

"He must 'a come on straight arter you," answered Quent, busying himself with laying the spare coat over the body, "and been shot just arter passing the house. 'Tis a cold night." He spoke with some restraint, and Jehu, catching his eye, gave a slight start of comprehension. He turned abruptly to the lad with a request that he would take one end of the hurdle while Quent led the horse.

So they returned to the farmhouse, a small, tragic procession, and laid the body of Alexander McQueen upon the long bare table in the middle of the kitchen. Andrew was despatched back to the Squire with an urgent summons, and Jehu went upstairs to call down the housekeeper.

Alone with the body William Quent stood studying it with attentive eyes. The tall clock in the corner pointed its hands to eleven, and began to strike with deliberation, as became a grandfather. William ran quick fingers through every pocket of the dead man's clothing, but all were empty. He gave a sigh, and sat down by the fire, white and frowning.

Jehu was absent for some little while, and returned to the kitchen with the announcement that Mrs. Lilian would be down in five minutes.

William, wheeling round in his chair, greeted him with a sharp question.

"Have 'ee any idee?" he queried, indicating the covered form on the table.

"I hardly know, Will," replied the other. "There were plenty that owed him a grudge, but I cannot understand how he came there so cold and stiffened in the time."

"Then you're thinking that he was murdered before, and carried out to the road?" suggested Quent.

"It looks as though that might be."

"Ah, what then?"

The two men's eyes met in joint comprehension of an unspoken thought. Jehu nodded.

"One or other of 'em," he said.

"What do 'ee mean to do about it, then?"

"Nothing. What can one do? My partnership is dissolved, but I can't give the game away. The sheriff must find the murderer as best he can, though God knows that if I could hang him I would do so twenty times over!"

The last words broke from Jehu's lips with a fury that startled Quent, used as he was to him. McQueen had been a man little respected and less loved; in many ways one who had earned the tribute of a violent death, and though the murder might, should certain facts transpire, land Quent, Jehu himself, and several others in a very awkward predicament, yet not one of them was likely to feel much personal regret for the exciseman's untimely end. The only person likely to be

much affected was Miss Miriam—ah, there lay the trouble for Jehu! If the murderer remained undiscovered and Jehu's connection with the contraband trade was not dragged too clearly into the light, all might go well with his suit. Smuggling was too well-known and popular a pastime to carry with it any disgrace. The Squire himself, J.P. though he might be, knew well when and where to turn a blind eye to events happening beneath his very nose. But if, by any unfortunate chance, Jehu should be suspected of any suppressed knowledge of the probable criminal, what favour was he likely to find with McQueen's niece?

“Then you'll only give evidence as to the finding of him,” William remarked, after a pregnant silence. “Ye'll not mention any suspicions?”

“Not if I can help it. I was a fool to say what I did before young Prowse. I shall probably have to repeat it all at the inquest.”

“Can't ye bribe the lad not to mention it?”

“Better not. The less he thinks of it the better. The whole affair is damned bad. Not that I should care but for Miss Miriam.”

He snatched up a candle from the mantel, and, carrying it over to the body, turned back the covering, and scrutinized the dead face closely. It had all the strange whiteness of a man several hours dead and already set in rigour. A strong, dark, unattractive face it had been in life, and even its new bleaching could not obliterate certain vicious traces. McQueen had been un-

sociable alike in his vices and his virtues, and surely not even the adopted daughter, to whom he had undoubtedly shown no small kindness, could mourn him for very long.

Jehu's mind, flying back to the Three Crows, took quick account of the men whom he had left there. Stephen King himself, Jemmy Heal, two or three yokels, and a fisherman from Poole, playing for the time being the part of a drover.

The countrymen might be ruled out of the reckoning. The man from Poole was unfamiliar to Jehu. Heal was hardly the man to take human life—at least in cold blood, and the exciseman's pistols were plainly unused. Jehu returned in thought to King, a close cautious man, about whom he had long ago come to the conclusion that in a tight corner he would undoubtedly prove himself to be an ugly customer, by reason of his cold blood and quick wits. He seemed to know no other form of scruple than a certain deliberate caution, and at times displayed a callousness to man and beast that might well fit him for murder, if murder was required to further his own interests. At this point in Jehu's cogitations the stairway door opened, and Mrs. Lilian entered, grotesquely arrayed in bedgown and cap.

Perhaps Mrs. Lilian's experience of the purlieus of Ram Alley had hardened her early to the sight of violence and its consequences. At any rate she showed no great horror at the sight of a corpse upon her kitchen table, but after a

glance in its direction busied herself in clearing away the remains of supper from the round table near the fire.

"A bad man come to 's end," she remarked drily, "and I'm not for saying that I ever expected him to die in his bed. Jehu, thee'd best put out a bottle of wine in the parlour for the Squire, and an extry glass. Doctor's up at the House, and will come wi' un for zartain. Put a light to the vire and take in zome o' these logs. It be martial cold in there, but us don't want the gells down to zee this."

With deft skinny fingers she cleared up the kitchen, and then disappeared into a back region, whence she returned with a fine white sheet to cover the body. A fire was soon kindled in the parlour and the wine set out, but these preparations were hardly completed before the Squire's loud voice sounded in the front passage.

Squire Paley was a man typical of his class and period, a strong, ruddy, rough-tongued descendant of a long line of moderate country gentlemen. His companion and crony, Dr. Bodlamb, had been spending a night at the House, celebrating the arrival of the Squire's fifth child and first son. He was a kindly, good-tempered man from Dorchester, a favourite with most people, of whatever class, and genuinely skilful in his profession, but given at times to suddenly evolving new theories, which he immediately put into practice upon the nearest patient with varying results.

He had no theory, however, for conjuring

back life into the body of Alexander McQueen. After a short examination of the corpse the four men went back to the parlour and stood regarding one another expressively.

“A thoroughly bad bit of business,” said the Squire. His voice had dropped a tone since his visit to the kitchen, and he spoke as though his words were intended to convey more than their obvious meaning. “I sent young Prowse to meet McQueen with a letter for the Mayor,” he added, to Jehu. “I met McQueen riding to Muckleford this afternoon, and he told me that he would be coming out about ten o’clock and that he meant to call on you about papers of some sort which he told me that he had just come across. Prowse tells me that you came out yourself only about a couple of hours ago.”

“That’s so, sir,” replied Jehu. “I left the Crows soon after eight, and Mr. McQueen was then supposed to be having a bit of supper in the parlour before riding home. He had been with Burbage earlier in the evening, and came on to see King—he said about a barrel or so of beer which he had ordered.” There was a faint emphasis on the word “said.”

The Squire sat down and began to whistle softly under his breath. William Quent shuffled his feet uneasily. The doctor’s pleasant face was very grave.

“Well,” said Squire Paley at last, accepting, with a nod of thanks, the glass which Jehu filled for him, “we can do nothing more till morning except send in word to Dorchester. It’s a most

damned awkward affair. What do you make of it all, Doctor?"

"The fellow's been dead for at least three hours," answered the doctor with decision.

"In that case," said the Squire perplexedly, "he must have been murdered at the inn."

"Exactly. The body must have been carried out afterwards, some time after eight o'clock."

"Who else was at the Crows, Poole?"

"Several labourers and a drover, sir. That was all, so far as I know."

"You had business with King?"

"Yes. We had a word or two in the yard and then bid good-night."

"And he told you that McQueen was in his parlour?"

"Yes."

"And alone?"

"He did not mention anyone else."

"You did not see McQueen yourself? King gave no message about his wishing to see you or having anything to show to you?"

"No. I did not go into the Crows at all. King came out to speak to me."

"Anyone with him?"

"Only Jem Heal."

The doctor rapped an excited finger on a chair-back.

"I'll take my oath," he said, "that the man was murdered there. Either he was killed at supper while King was below, or else King did it himself just after. I know something about

the pair of them which makes it highly probable that he did.”

“ There’ll have to be a proof or two found before we can charge him, though,” said the Squire thoughtfully, “ and God knows who will be dragged into the matter afore it’s finished. Better keep your theory to yourself.”

“ In short,” said the Doctor bluntly, “ let the probable murderer escape justice because he can give away half the County to the Crown. Umph! ”

It was undoubtedly an uncomfortable corner for a J.P., with a reputation for integrity, to negotiate. The Squire’s red face flushed deeper, then he laughed shortly.

“ The Doctor,” he said, “ has put the case into a nutshell. What do you say, Poole? ”

“ I say, sir,” replied Jehu, quietly, “ that Mr. McQueen was known to have more enemies than friends, and that anyone out of a dozen might have shot him in return for that matter of Joe Tyler’s hanging.”

“ No doubt. But if he was seen at the inn this evening and not seen to leave it, though he was found stiff and stark more’n eight mile out only two hours later—what then? ”

“ They will have to find out if any saw him leave the Crows and when,” answered Jehu, “ before they can tell when he was shot. It’s a coldish night and a man might stiffen quickly out on the road.”

“ All the same,” replied Doctor Bodlamb, firmly, “ if I am required to give my opinion on

oath, I shall have to say that I believe the fellow to have been dead for quite three hours before he was found at half-past ten."

The Squire moved impatiently in his chair, and turned a broad shoulder on his friend.

"What about the horse?" he asked. "Prowse met it bolting along the road, but was not quick enough to catch it. It is unlikely that a three-hours' corpse should ride a horse eight mile out from Muckleford."

"There must have been two horse-men," returned the Doctor, unabashed, "a dead man and a living. My belief is that the murderer led the dead man's horse out from Muckleford, and then turned it adrift on the road, and of course the beast threw the corpse, as soon as it could, and bolted. The road is too dry to show any marks, but we might go and have a look."

"Very well," said the Squire reluctantly, rising as he spoke, "and after that you had best ride back to Dorchester and take word to the Sheriff, and in the morning break the news to Mistress Miriam."

The party finished a hasty glass of wine and passed out once again into the moonlight, along the hard white road. Clear and plain stretched the way over the rise and fall of the downs, but no scrutiny, however thorough, yielded any clue as to the number of riders who had ridden out to the farm.

After a vain search the company turned back, and presently the Doctor, much muffled and heavy of heart, rode back to the town under a

waning moon to carry ill tidings to the Sheriff and to Miriam McQueen.

Jehu Poole stood again beside the corpse and pondered aloud.

“Papers to show to me,” he muttered, “but none in his pockets when we found him. What the de’il do you make of that, William?”

CHAPTER III

MIRIAM MCQUEEN stood at a window of her uncle's house and gazed out disconsolately at a patch of autumn garden.

The house, little more than a cottage, stood end-wise to the cobbled street, one narrow gable peering out between two more imposing buildings and the rest trailing its length back through a walled garden. The living room, in which Miriam was standing, presented one diamond-paned window to the street, and the other, wider, lower, and seated, gave upon a patch of grass and flower-beds. The room was long and low, and in it Miriam's slim figure appeared taller than its actual height.

The season was mid-October, and the garden without was already desolate from a hard frost. Alexander McQueen had been buried for three weeks; the inquest, with its verdict of wilful murder against an unknown criminal, was long over, and McQueen's creditors had appeared with the suddenness of midges in June.

Mysterious debts which no one seemed to have suspected came to light, transactions with seedy

individuals whose bills were at odd variance with their claimant's coats. It was now plain that nothing but a complete sale of furniture and effects could clear off the last of these debts.

Miriam was twenty-five, and the last fifteen years of her life had been spent without a break in the same quiet old house. Her uncle's death, in spite of its tragedy, could not be said to have stirred her to any deep-felt grief, but rather to have struck her with a stunned sense of calamity. Her feeling for him had been chiefly one of gratitude and the cool affection of long use. He had been an integral part of her life ever since the day when he had appeared at the house near the wharves of Marseilles to bring her over to England. Looking back to that period Miriam realized for the first time her strange lack of relations and her utter dependence upon her uncle's kindness.

Recollection of her father she had none. Who or what he was beyond the fact that he was a Scotchman and Uncle Alexander's brother, she did not know.

Her mother, the tall dominant Frenchwoman who had died a Marseilles, had never mentioned him to her, but had many times impressed upon Miriam that on her mother's side she was a de Lomagne, and entitled to hold up her head with the proudest in France.

However that might have been, no de Lomagne came to rescue the child from penury when Sylvie McQueen died, but merely a dark, stern, laconic uncle from England. And now,

for the second time, she stood penniless and alone with her world broken up about her feet.

Sylvie McQueen had handed on to her daughter many of her own characteristics ; the same tall figure, dark colouring, clear brown eyes, and quick vivacity coupled with an intense inward reserve. Alexander had been proud of his niece, and had taken pains with her education. Miriam wrote, cyphered, and played upon the spinet better than some of the county ladies, and had long ago striven to console herself for the lack of friends which her uncle's unpopularity engendered by reading every English work upon which she could lay hands. She had had her chances of marriage, for good looks and intelligence were attractive to the youth of Dorchester in spite of the disadvantage of a surly guardian. On each occasion Alexander had urged her, gruffly, to make the best of her chance, because it might be her last, but Miriam, for reasons which she kept to herself, had declined each suitor in turn, and her uncle had never attempted coercion. To-day, with a sudden fear of the future upon her, she realized that she was past twenty-five, penniless, proud, and had thrown away all her apparent chances of a comfortable settlement in life for the sake of a three years' distant dream.

O that time of secret humiliation and pain three years ago ! Even now the recollection of it sent the colour flying to her face. No one had been a penny the wiser but herself, but, to natures whose inborn reserve prompts them to

hide even from themselves the real nature of their deepest desires, it is a bitter revelation of weakness to discover that they have broken their unconscious rule and dallied with unjustified hope. A brief acquaintance with a handsome face, educated mind, and a better polish of manner than could be met with among her immediate neighbours, and Miriam's restrained emotional nature had flared up into a secret fire of passion, which she now thanked Heaven that she had been able to suppress unnoticed. Only when the unconscious object of all this unreasoning desire had left Dorchester for Barbados did Miriam awake to the enormity of her dreams. The result had been the stamping of her handsome face with something of that hardness of expression which had marred her mother's. Perhaps, in this, too, the pair were alike, and some similar fire had set the clay of Sylvie McQueen's soul.

It seemed to Sylvie's daughter, as for the first time she consciously reviewed the uneventful history of her past, that all keenness alike of interest and desire had, for her, been spent upon that one hot passion, and that, since everything from the close of that enchanted time had been commonplace, she must henceforward make commonsense her one rule of conduct. If the chance of a home and a decently endurable husband should come her way she must take it; meanwhile she must accept shelter from the roof of her one intimate friend in the town, the wife of a corn-chandler, and make her home behind

the shop until she could find some other employment.

Yes, at least that much of her prospect was settled, and the very drabness of the outlook acted as a soporific to her feelings. There is rest of a sort in the acceptance of a finality.

Having arrived at this point in her meditation, Miriam was turning away from the window with an energetic movement which unconsciously gave the lie to her conclusions, when a loud knock at the street door, followed by the sound of the maid-of-all-work's hasty flight from the back regions in response, broke the silence of the house. A man's voice echoed through the passage, and Jehu Poole entered the room, half announced by the flurried servant.

Jehu had long been a familiar sight about the exciseman's house. Although he aided in the running of contraband beneath Mr. McQueen's very nose, and although McQueen himself was well aware of the fact, the two men had a few tastes in common, the principal one being a mutual love of literature. At the inquest Poole had naturally figured largely before the eyes of the town as one of the principal witnesses of the case; indeed, had not his known integrity and popularity stood him in good stead, he might very easily have found himself penned into an ugly corner, for the documents which Miriam McQueen had sworn to seeing her uncle take out with him on the day of his death had completely vanished, and no one had any inkling of their nature or worth beyond the fact that the mur-

dered man had expected them to be of interest to Jehu. However, William Quent had borne witness as to his friend's whereabouts between eight and ten o'clock that evening, and nobody was desirous of probing too deeply into the matter. Moreover, by Mr. McQueen's will, Jehu Poole had been appointed executor and trustee for the dead man's adopted daughter. There was, therefore, nothing unusual in his sudden appearance at the house that evening, yet he brought with him into the room so changed an aspect that it struck her at the very instant of his arrival.

A new coat, a lace cravat, and well-brushed hair, were all remarkable things in connection with Jehu Poole away from London. For the first time Miriam noticed the real quality of his good looks, that air of familiarity with best clothes which so few countrymen possess. She had taken him for so long as part of her ordinary routine that she had never troubled to mark the various stages of their friendship from childish indifference to confidence. As for Jehu's alteration of vision during the last seven months, the dull ache remaining from her foolish infatuation for quite a different type of manhood, had left her blind to signs which a less pre-occupied mind might have discovered.

"You are not busy, mistress?" asked Jehu, advancing into the room with his head among the rafters. "I hoped you would be in, but was afraid that you might have gone to Mrs. Glass."

"I am going to-morrow," answered the girl,

motioning him to a chair and seating herself on the wide window-seat. The afternoon was already darkening, but neither made any move towards the wood fire which burnt at the opposite side of the room. An unexpected constraint fell upon them, and a silence which Jehu seemed to be at a loss to fill. Miriam, feeling that trouble and physical weariness had dulled her wits, made no attempt to help him out.

"I came in this afternoon," resumed Jehu at length, "because I particularly wanted to see you, Miss Miriam."

"About my uncle's affairs?" she asked wearily, anticipating yet another painful discussion of ways and means. Jehu, to her relief, shook his head.

"No, not this time, mistress," he replied slowly. "It was more a matter of my own that I thought of discussing, though perhaps yours along with it."

"Mine? There is not much to say of that, Jéhu," she answered with a sad little laugh, "but if there is anything here which you wished to buy to-morrow—is that it?" she asked, breaking off at a sudden movement from the big man.

"Hardly, and yet yes," said Jehu, groping for the opening in the conversation which her suggestion afforded. "That is, mistress, I came to offer a few things in exchange for something else."

Miriam made no remark, and he went on, gaining courage at having made a beginning.

"Before your uncle's death," he continued, "I

had meant to ask it of him, with your consent, but matters fell out so that I had to wait awhile, and I would have waited till all here," indicating the room, "was settled, but I had not the patience after all."

He laughed a trifle awkwardly, and Miriam, with a sudden onrush of comprehension, started, and then sat painfully still. On an irresistible impulse Jehu swept away the last remnant of practised speech, and plunged madly into the heart of the matter.

"I want you to marry me," he said bluntly, "and I've wanted it this six months and more. There's not a thing I wouldn't do to make ye happy, if ye'll let me, and there's not a man can love you half as much as I do."

It was out at last, the declaration which he had so often carried to her door and then been incapable of uttering. He rose as he spoke, a giant figure in the dusk, and Miriam, swaying a little beneath the mingled feelings of relief and surprise, caught his arm as he came towards her. Thankfulness for this unexpected way of escape from the dreary outlook which she had faced a few minutes earlier mingled with a numb feeling of shame, had held her dumb, but she grasped his sleeve like a drowning woman and leant against him in all the weakness of a strong nature shaken by a sudden assault. Of all people Jehu Poole! Why had she never guessed this possibility sooner? What could have made her so stupid? Here he was, the man whom she had never discerned as a possible lover, offering

her all which she had imagined herself to have forfeited by her folly—a home, and that better than any other which she could have expected.

“Ye’ll take me?” Jehu’s voice sounded close to her ear, and his arms folded about her with the grasp of a man who means to take what he wants if it is not given to him.

“O I never thought of this!” said Miriam faintly. “I never even dreamt of it! Ye never showed me a sign of wanting me, and I never thought of it!”

“But ye’ll take me?”

Silence.

“Ye’ve let me kiss you, Miriam, and you cannot draw back now.”

“Ye dinnot know me!” she exclaimed, impelled against her will to protest. “I have not much heart left in me to care for anyone, Jehu, and I’m too weary to know whether I love thee or not. Think it over a while longer.” But she still clung to him.

“Never another minute,” responded Jehu gaily. “O lassie, lassie, lass, what a born fool I’ve been to wait so long! Could I have won you before, if I had tried?”

The last words steadied her like a douche of cold water. She tried gently to free herself, but Jehu held fast in his triumph and kissed her again.

“I dinnot know if you could have,” she said, soberly. “In very truth, Jehu, you are the last man I should have thought of, though you *are* the only man worth having in the place.”

It was scarcely a glowing tribute, but Jehu was too well pleased to note its ambiguity. He tightened his clasp, crushing her with a half-fierce delight.

"Try and begin loving me now!" he commanded.

"It would not be very hard," she replied musingly, thrilled in spite of herself by the first imperative wooing which she had yet known. "Ye're a *man!*"

"And ye're a woman, lassie," he replied, sitting down beside her on the window-seat, "a living woman, and there's not your like anywhere. See here, sweetheart, I've been a lonely fellow all these years, without a mate or one true comrade. . . . I cannot live the life that satisfies folk hereabout, and I dinnot believe you can, either. There are better things in the world than breeding sheep or cooking mutton, eh, my dear? There are things which you would care about that I have never mentioned to a soul. I go up, whiles, to London and mix with different men, and often find it as lonesome as being on the downs here. Come along with me and the world's a new place. I was a blind fool not to have found you out sooner, but now that I have, 'fore God I'll not let ye go!"

She sat stunned before the fresh vista opening up to her view. Surely this was a truer, surer, steadier, romance than the groundless one of past dreams? A romance, also, backed by the surety of a comfortable home which the thrifty French strain in her nature could not help appre-

ciating. Companionship! How much of that had she really known, despite that past friendship? Jehu, too, it appeared, had unuttered dreams to share and offered to her the joy of a real communion. She shut her eyes resolutely to the more passionate side of this new love, and even as she did so Jehu's arms, which had slightly loosened their hold, tightened about her again, destroying her last impulse of protest.

"I'll take you, Jehu," she said, with a touch of her natural vivacity, "because you have caught me and I cannot get away!"

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS was drawing near, and an icy mist, creeping from the sea, had penetrated far inland to hang in a white sheet about the farm. Seated at his broad writing-table in the south room which he had long ago converted into a study, Jehu looked out at the dim shapes of a few apple-trees, backed by a silent immovable curtain of delicate fog.

It was cold, and, to most people, cheerless weather, but Jehu found no fault with it. He was intensely happy, and his happiness found expression in mental activity. The new year would see Miriam installed as mistress of the farmhouse, and before then the work which had for so many years been his secret dream, and which he had so often, discouraged, laid aside, must be finished, ready for the press and for her approving eyes.

Hitherto his own want of scholarship had stood, a painful barrier, between the creations of his brain and their expression. He had found cause to regret the lost opportunities of his school-days, when, had his mind been more will-

ingly bent to the acquirement of Latin and Greek, and less absorbed in the study of every specimen of purely English composition upon which he could lay hands, he might perhaps have earned an Exhibition and found his way to the University. But in those days Jehu's unhallowed preference for the products of his mother-tongue had proved a sad hindrance to the digestion of the Classics. It was not until his first visit to London, when, by the kind offices of a bookseller acquaintance of his father, he had obtained an introduction into Button's Coffee-house, that he understood the poverty of his own equipment as a possible author, and the fact that in the opinion of the literary lights there assembled the productions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were of small account.

Stoutly he strove to cultivate a politer taste in things literary, but in spite of himself the sturdy Elizabethan and Stuart drama and the merry strains of the Beggars' Opera held him fast to his early loves. Before them ancient classic and modern pastoral alike gave way, the former, perhaps, because its original charms were locked in a dead language to which he scarcely held the key, the latter because it could in no way be reconciled with his own first-hand knowledge of country life.

Life, indeed, and its portrayal, held for Jehu the chief charm of his secret attempts at authorship. To mix at longer or shorter intervals with the world of men, and then to retire to the Downs Farm and the world of books, had become the

instinctive method of his life, and to express the thoughts and impressions which both worlds aroused in him his ambition. In the City he had neither social standing nor patronage to encourage him, and felt himself to be still a student, an onlooker and listener at coffee-house assemblies, trying to sift the grain of true literature from its surrounding chaff of politics and superficial learning. His respect for most of the modern leaders of the literary world and his contempt for many of their methods and satellites mingled strangely, awakening within him a keen desire to produce, somewhen, a work based purely upon his own living study of common humanity which should force respectful attention, from the critics without the aid of patronage. Urged by this ambition he let the farm to Elihu Burbage of Muckleford, retaining for himself only the house and a few fields, and thenceforward devoted long hours to the disheartening difficulties of composition.

It was a wild aspiration for the unknown son of a Dorset farmer, yet at thirty-six Jehu still clung to it. It had borne him safely through much inward loneliness of spirit, and though of late he had almost laid it aside as beyond his power of attainment, the unexpected sympathy and force of a great passion had filled him now with a new conviction of power. He discovered in himself a new creature, born into a fresh world of emotional experience; articulate, able at last to move his mental limbs freely with conscious strength. In the delight of this discovery his old outlets of

energy were abandoned. He had absorbed all the needful material for his work; love had crowned and unified his knowledge; henceforth all that remained was to make use of it. Without giving two thoughts to the matter he abruptly dropped his partnership in the running of contraband, much to the chagrin of Stephen King, and was only vaguely aware of the distrust and suspicion which his action aroused in King's breast. But William Quent, that habitual student of portents, noted in which directions the wind of Stephen's favour blew, and drew his own conclusions therefrom.

The fog, advancing like a slow sentinel, took up its station close to the study window, dimming the light with its increasing density. Jehu's pen came to a full stop, and he rose, stretching his great limbs with a contented gesture. He had written enough for the present, written himself out; now for a pipe of tobacco, a couple of candles, and, later, an hour with his fiddle, practising a new air which he had bought for Miriam's spinet.

Jehu had picked up his first knowledge of his instrument from a local fiddler who accompanied the singing in the parish church and the dancing at Harvest Home. Later he had contrived a few lessons in London from a better master, and now played with some skill and considerable spirit. By the time that shutters had been shut and curtains drawn he was pacing up and down the fire-lit candle-brightened room playing a rollicking air in keeping with his mood of triumph.

Presently the mood changed, after the manner of moods, and he began picking out the tune of a song, heard long ago at the Haymarket Theatre in London. It was a light, delicate, tender little tune, and after a few hesitating attempts it returned to him and he began to play it softly, humming the words meanwhile.

*“ You meaner beauties of the night
That poorly satisfy our eyes
More by your number than your light,
You common people of the skies,
What are you when the Moon doth rise?

“ Ye violets that first appear,
By your pure purple mantles known,
Like the proud virgins of the year
As if the Spring were all your own,
What are you when the Rose is blown? ”

The dainty significance of words and music caught him in its illusive sweetness. He repeated them up and down the room with a lingering pleasure until Mrs. Lilian abruptly opened the door and thrust in her head

“ Jehu, supper! ” she remarked, and withdrew. Jehu laid down his fiddle with a laugh and followed her to the room which formed her own special sanctum. It was here that, as a rule, the pair ate their meals together. The two maids ate in the kitchen, and after supper, under Mrs. Lilian’s peremptory rule, were packed off to bed.

The sanctum was a small panelled apartment, of which two sides of wall were filled with cupboards and a third by a large linen press. It was

* Sir Henry Wootton to Princess Eliz. of Eng. Queen of Bohemia.

a place of many associations for Jehu; associations of turkey rhubarb and jalap, preserves, chastisement, hornbooks, and, on two occasions, of funeral cake and wine. Glancing across the supper-table at old Lilian it struck him for the first time, and with something of a shock, that before long she would be mistress here no longer.

Mrs. Lilian had taken the news of Jehu's intended marriage without much comment, and had immediately plunged into preparations for the bride with apparent goodwill. When Miriam's personal treasures, the chestnut-wood wardrobe, spinet, and bureau, came out from Dorchester, Miriam herself accompanied them on a day's visit to her future home. It was the first time that she had ever seen the farm, and she passed from room to room, under Lilian's guidance, with a keen interest. The pair seemed to be friendly enough, but afterwards Jehu had been slightly piqued at Lilian's matter of fact reception of so much wit and charm. She considered Miriam "well enough," and, when pressed for a further opinion, admitted that Jehu was fortunate in securing a wife who shared his tastes; but she seemed hardly to have noticed the girl's grace or the beauty of her animation, and it now dawned upon Jehu that perhaps Lilian still expected to be house-keeper of the place until the day of her death or infirmity. Perhaps Miriam would find no fault with such an arrangement, would be glad of a release from the cares which had filled up her girlhood, but, recalling her energy and capacity for work, he felt a twinge of misgiving.

"At any rate," he mused, "all should be smooth for the first few months." In the Spring he intended taking Miriam up to London for a visit of some duration, and until that was over she was hardly likely to care to undertake the control of store-room and press.

Supper proceeded for some time in its usual quietness. Mrs. Lilian's conversation was generally limited to an occasional pointed remark, and as often as not the pair fed in silence, with scarcely the exchange of a word, a remnant, maybe, of childish habit on Jehu's part, remaining from the days when silence, combined with meek acceptance of whatever fare was put upon his plate, had been a stern regulation of the house-keeper's.

But the old lady had, to-night, something simmering upon the hob of her mind which presently reached the right pitch for expression.

"Jehu!" she said, startling him by the abruptness of her attack, "What be 'ee goin' to do about Branscombe's cottage?"

"Branscombe's cottage?" For the moment he failed to remember the subject of her query.

"Cottage Joe Branscombe lived in," explained Lilian, "that shepherd of Elihu's that died a month agone. 'Tis yourn; Elihu don't rent it from 'ee, and Branscombe'd no kith nor kin. I've been thinking as I'd like to end my days there come the zummer, if zo be as you've no objection."

"I do not see why you should leave us, cousin," replied Jehu after a pause. "Miriam

would not wish to turn you out, and this is your rightful home all your life."

Lilian poured herself out a glass of ale with a steady hand, and shook her head decidedly.

"I never ha' reckoned on that, my lad," she answered, "and I never have intended it. As long as I could earn my keep I've been content, but them days are going over. A Poole knocked I down, and it was but fair that a Poole should zet I up again, but now that I have my own feet to stand on I want no 'ooman above I. I will not stand in your way, as an old 'ooman, whom the A'mighty has no doubt punished since, once stood in mine, making bad worse. When your time for the quarrelling comes, as come it will, with your own hot head and her proud French face, I'll not be in the zame house to zee it. Ye can zoothe and zettle again by yerselves, but I'll ha' no concarn with the mattermony of any Poole. No. I'll rent the cottage if you will give it to I, and bide there quiet with a bit of a lass to do for I, and then ye can fight ye're own fights and whip yer own bairns as ye will. But I'll bide here long enough to set yer wife in the house-ways and give her time for her book-larning and music."

"If I believed, mistress, that your heart was not kinder than your tongue," exclaimed Jehu, "I should take offence. But there never yet was a time when you did not speak like a shrew in order to hide a kindness. If you have made up your mind to leave us at least we can find you a better home than Branscombe's Cottage. There are but three rooms there."

“ ‘Tiz the place I zet on long ago,” retorted Lilian, “ and I want no other. Mend I the wash-house and pigsty and zet the garden in order and there I’ll go. A good sunny zpot and zheltered and the orchard at the back well-zstocked. Ye can give I a pig and maybe a hen or two, to show yer good will in return for the tongue-bangings that have made ye a man.”

She cut a slice of cheese and fell to eating it with evident appetite. Jehu could read in her face no sign of regret for her approaching change of status, but rather a kind of elation and sparkle as at the near attainment of some desirable end.

“ You shall have all that you want, cousin,” he said warmly, “ and in any way that you please, but if at any time you should think better of this plan do not hide it. It shall never be said that I was an ungrateful son to one who has been my mother.”

“ Thanks be to the A’mighty that I never were!” responded the practical Lilian drily. “ I have many times been thankful that I’ve had no more to do with the creation of another Poole than the chastising of ‘n. But on the whole ye’ve proved a credit to I, and if ye also prove a better husband than ye’re veyther and’s cousin I shall be well pleased. At least ye’ve chosen ye’re match, for I should be sorry for the vule that tried to put upon Miss Miriam.”

This transition from the pleasant company of his own thoughts to the rather frosty atmosphere of Lilian’s common-sense had, perhaps, ruffled the surface of Jehu’s temper. An unreasoning

exasperation seized him at her prophesy of rocks ahead in his matrimonial sea, and, springing out of his seat, he came round the table and dealt Lilian a kiss that was more akin to a blow than a caress. Laying his two hands upon her shoulders he shook her gently, much in the manner of a large dog tolerantly correcting a troublesome kitten. Humour, combined with irritation, sent the hot blood flushing into his cheeks, and Lilian, released as suddenly as she had been seized, nodded to herself at the confirmation of an old conviction.

“Zee there!” she remarked quietly. “Just zo do a man Poole deal with a ‘ooman. Let her but provoke him, and it may begin wi’ a kiss, but ‘twill end in a zhaking, and arter a while it begins with a zhaking and ends in well-nigh murder. I weren’t a ‘ooman when your veyther brought I here, but a withered ztick of a thing with a will of me own, and zo I were let alone. But I know your zstock well, and many’s the evil flogging ye’d have had, my lad, if I had not been by. A Poole’s kindness is free but dinnot cross him!”

Jehu stood, his irritation subsiding and his good-humour returning, and looked down into the face of the little woman, flushed from the shaking which she had received. It was the first time since his childhood that he had thought of pitting his great physical strength against her unbreakable weakness. As a hot-tempered child he had, on occasion, flown at her, only to receive prompt punishment and to feel ashamed of himself because she carried no tales to his father.

Lilian's moral scourge had been unsparing, steady, and effective.

But now her rule was coming to an end. There could be no half-measures with Lilian, and he was grateful to her for offering a self-effacement as complete as her former ascendancy. He kissed her again, apologetically, and she received the salutation with a grin.

"A wise lad," she remarked, when he had returned to his chair, "mayhap wise enough to tak' a French wife!" and thereupon she relapsed into silence, discouraging all further attempts at discussing her own or Jehu's affairs.

After she had gone to hasten the maids to their quarters in the attic Jehu returned to his study and sat smoking thoughtfully. Presently he knocked the ashes from his pipe and re-read the last pages of his manuscript. Then he docketed them neatly, smiled at his own reflections, and went upstairs.

Up in the chill of his bedchamber, undressing by the light of a solitary candle, he found himself stimulated to fresh wakefulness. Half undressed he stripped aside the curtains and looked out through the closed panes into the dense blackness of the fog. Not for the first time he fell to wondering about the grim unknown details of old Lilian's early history. What bitterness must she not have known at the marring and twisting of her comely body! What black fog of misery had swallowed her in the sordid regions of the Fleet to disgorge her a distorted mockery of her former self! Small wonder if her tongue

had become biting, her silence eloquent of disillusion, and her attitude to the family of which one member had broken her and another patched her up one of mixed distrust and gratitude. Poor Lilian, to whom justice had come at last under the distasteful form of charity!

He tried to imagine her young and in love, but found the task difficult, she was so firmly connected in all his memory with the sterner side of existence. He had never known until recently the meaning of the phrase "a woman's tenderness," and Miriam's half shy advances came to him with a tingling amazement of delight. His thoughts switched back to her from Lilian at this point, and he stood rejoicing in the very contrast of the cold discomfort of his body with the glowing pictures of his mind. His hand closed upon a knot of black ribbon, filched from her gown and now resting in his pocket, and then, waking up to the increasing bitterness of the night, he jerked to the curtains and proceeded to bed.

CHAPTER V

ON a fair April morning, three months after Miriam McQueen had been subtly transformed into Mistress Miriam Poole, Mr. Robert Purling senior, ship-owner and West India merchant, sat in his library in St. James' Street, London, dictating letters to his secretary.

It was a clear soft day of Spring, and long shafts of pale sunlight, sloping through the high window of the room, illuminated the orderly writing-table, the pale face of Mr. Purling's secretary, and the pink embroideries of Mr. Purling's waistcoat.

The elder man sat at ease in an armchair at one end of the table, dictating in a quiet rather somnolent tone to his employé, who sat on his left hand round an angle of the board, writing with languid diligence. As he dictated, Mr. Purling's gaze raked the younger man attentively from head to heel.

The letter in hand ended, the ship-owner drew himself upright in his chair to scrutinize his secretary's handiwork. Nodding his approval, he pushed back his seat and rose.

"Enough for the present, David," he said. "You may sand that and seal it, then put on your hat and leave it by hand with my compliments. You understand?"

David Dane bowed obediently, and began, nothing loath, to tidy up the small litter before him. Standing he displayed a long lanky person clothed in decent brown, topped by the hairless weak-chinned face of a passably good-looking lad of seventeen.

"I shall want 'ee at the office at four o'clock," continued Mr. Purling, "but go out and take a breath of air until then. Ye're as sleepy as an owl in the sun."

"Thank you, sir."

The young man withdrew, but paused in the open doorway and stood back to admit a man-servant who announced the arrival of Mr. Poole and in his turn stood aside to give the visitor entrance. The ship-owner strode genially across the room to meet him.

"My dear sir!" he exclaimed, "I never was so surprised in my life as I was when your messenger arrived this morning from the Rainbow, after nigh on three years of silence! And you married, that was almost afraid so much as to look at a petticoat! Tut, tut, tut! Well, a hearty welcome back to the Town, dear lad!"

"Thank'ee, sir. I determined to call upon you first thing, and our coach arrived earlier than we expected. My wife being tired I have left her

sleeping and came along as soon as I received your reply."

"Sit down. I have an appointment at my office at four o'clock, but we have an hour yet. Will you dine with me after?"

"Not to-night, by your leave."

"Ah, dear me, I forgot that you are a married man. How d'ye like the change?"

"'Tis a great change for the better, sir."

"Come, that's good hearing. How long will you be staying in Town?"

"A matter of a month or so. I have business with Murth, the publisher."

"What, have you been writing a book?"

"I have spent ten years at the task, but Murth considers it worth his trouble to publish it. I have already left it with him on my way here."

"O ho! Why, the great must look to their laurels, for there is a new genius come to Town! May I inquire the nature of the work?"

"A play or two and some verse."

"Poetry! The Lord love us, Poole, but I never should connect a fellow of your size with the trickery of poetry. I should have imagined that plain prose had suited you best. But there I am an unpoetical merchant. Tell me of your wife."

Jehu recounted the history of his marriage, eulogizing the lady of his choice the better for the brevity and sincerity of his words. The ship-owner smiled and sighed.

"So she's half a Frenchwoman, is she?" he commented. "Then she must meet a compatriot. There are some French friends of Robert's lodging at this moment in Pall Mall."

"What news have you of Mr. Robert?"

"Of Robert? Why, he's as well as ever. Ah, I forgot! Did you not know that he is still in England?"

"Why no! How is that? We have imagined him living in Barbadoes."

"His brother died on the very eve of his departure, and my fine nephew inherited the Cornish property. So he made the Grand Tour instead of going out to doctor the niggers, and has but recently returned. He has sold the estate and is living here with me until his new Town house is set in order."

"Then we shall meet him shortly, I hope," replied Jehu. "Miriam will be pleased to hear this news, for Mr. Robert was often at her uncle's house studying in his library, and she is well acquainted with him."

"I told him of your coming when I had read your letter this morning," said Mr. Purling. "He had business to attend to, but mentioned that he would wait upon you at the Rainbow. Now come, bring along the mistress and dine with us to-morrow."

"With pleasure, sir," said Jehu, rising to take his leave. "By the way, was that Davy Dane who was in here when I arrived?"

"The same; little Davy's shot up a many

inches in body. I would that he had done the like in brain and soul, Poole; but I promised his dead father that I'd keep him and fit him to make his way, and I'm doing my best. The fellow's my secretary; I put him into that post in order to keep a personal eye upon him, and he lives in the house, but I fear that the dissipated strain will out, sooner or later. 'Tis a weak lad, and careless with the tongue."

"But grateful to you, sir, I hope?"

"More or less, more or less. Well, good-bye for the present, and let's see you both at five to-morrow evening."

They shook hands and parted, and Jehu strode gaily out into the clean-washed fugitive glory of the April afternoon. London, London, London; city of dreams, desires, and frustration; town which he had trodden so often before in a fever of unsatisfied loneliness and spiritual unrest! On his last visit he had forsaken the place for good, tired of the pursuit of unattainable success, but now it welcomed him with a new face. All was well, and to-morrow he would look in at Button's and the Chapter and see if three whole years had caused him to be forgotten. Ah well! With Miriam and Murth to aid him his name might yet become one which should not be forgotten, although three centuries should pass over it. There was surely that in the goodly pile of manuscript now in Murth's keeping which was bound to outlive him.

He walked, whistling merrily, down the busy thoroughfare, the glance of many eyes following

him as he went, and among them that of a furtive pair belonging to a weasel-faced gentleman of the name of Mole.

CHAPTER VI

To Cheapside, after a trinket for Miriam, back along an alley, through St. Paul's Churchyard, ignoring for the time being the attractions of the book-shops, and under Temple Bar, Jehu made his way, keeping brisk pace with the gaiety of his thoughts, and pleasantly unaware of the neat figure in drab which followed him at a respectful distance, and was almost crushed to death in a congestion of traffic beneath the Bar. Very persistent was Mr. Mole, and his bright eyes were rewarded at length by a vision of their quarry turning in at the Rainbow Tavern just at a moment when further pursuit seemed hopeless owing to a sudden block in the tide of passengers. Darting a venomous glance at an obstructing citizen he sought the shade of the Tavern himself, and was about to enter and make his way to the coffee-room when the sight of Jehu's broad person at an unexpected standstill just within made him pause. A voice rang out cheerily, and a gentleman emerged from the coffee-room door with extended hand, and an exclamation of "Poole! My learned friend, Jehu!"

"Why, Mr. Robert, sir!" said Jehu cordially, "I thought that we had bid goodbye to you for good and all when you left us at Dorchester, until your good uncle told me of your windfall an hour ago."

"Come in here for a moment," replied the other, still shaking him by the hand.

They turned into the room, and Mole, after a deferential pause, followed them, taking a seat near the door. A party of diners was just completing a sitting which had lasted from two o'clock in the afternoon, and a sprinkling of other folk were entering for the six o'clock meal. Jehu and his friend walked over to the opposite side of the place, so that Mr. Mole was unable to catch more than a smatter of their conversation. He missed nothing, however, of the contrast between the two men, nor of the faint appearance of boorishness which that contrast revealed in Jehu Poole.

Robert Purling was, indeed, a very fine gentleman, though his dress showed none of the elaboration then coming into vogue. From the perfection of his headgear to the perfection of his shoes he was, as his present observer inwardly commented, "all of a piece," as different in his rarity of ease and grace from the crowd about them as was Jehu in size and vigour. Instinctively Mr. Mole characterized him as a scholar.

"I heard of your marriage from my respected uncle," said Robert, "and that you were bringing Mistress Miriam to Town and to your old lodging here, so I hastened from an appointment

to pay my respects, and finding you out, waited below instead of sending up my name. A thousand congratulations, Poole! Do you know, I always thought that you had not noticed the brightness of that jewel?"

"I was a blind bat only too long," replied Jehu gaily. "Gad! I was a slow fellow!"

"And Mrs. Miriam?" queried Robert lightly. "Ah, but I forgot that all ladies have a keen eye for diamonds, though they cannot all distinguish true gems from paste." His good-natured tone almost robbed the remark of its vague offence, but Jehu coloured hotly, and for a second his black brows dropped ominously. Then he laughed. Plainly Robert Purling, student of medicine, recovering in country air from a threatened consumption, had not greatly changed in his transformation into a gentleman of means. The old fondness for delicate innuendo, which had made him none too popular at Dorchester, remained unimpaired. Yet, as of yore, the humourous good-temper of the clear eyes companioning the subtle tongue disarmed hostility and suggested that whosoever should take the speaker seriously must needs be a self-affectioned fool. Brushing the doubtful compliment aside, Jehu asked for further details of his friend's good fortune.

"I have inherited a property most undesirably damp and isolated," said Robert, "but with it a little fortune most excellently well preserved. Timothy and I had differed all our lives. After our father's death we parted, for I could never

become interested in cattle-breeding, and he had a mortal antipathy both to physic and physicians, and could not forgive me for desiring to spend my patrimony in the study of that science. Well, the patrimony came to an end, and there remained nothing but my uncle's good-will and Barbadoes, for brother Timothy had washed his hands of my worldly affairs and I had somehow contrived to get myself so monstrously into debt that my uncle was prepared to do likewise. I was to have gone abroad as a physician on a friend's plantation, where, by all accounts, one was badly needed, when my poor brother was gored by one of his own bulls and, remembering that after all there were but the two of us, made me his heir. I sold the estate, and preferred a sight of the Continent to Barbadoes."

"Well, sir, your friends are the richer for your good luck," said Jehu, "as well as your creditors. My wife will be rejoiced to see you. If you have not already dined will you not join us? Mrs. Miriam was tired after our journey, so our dinner is late to-day."

"I have fasted in hope of this invitation," replied Robert. They lingered for a moment, Robert asking news of several old acquaintances, Jehu replying. Mole ordered meat pudding and a news-sheet and kept his draughty seat, from which Jehu's vigorous passage with his guest almost swept him. The position gave its occupant a glimpse of all who went in or out from the street.

Robert Purling followed his host up the dim

stairway to a narrow landing and thence into a small parlour looking upon the busy thoroughfare. As they entered, an inner door opened briskly and Jehu's wife came out from her room with a quick rustle of petticoats and the energetic step which Robert well remembered. She stopped short as her husband ushered in their visitor.

"Here is an old friend come to see us, my dear," said Jehu heartily. "The Barbadoes did not claim him after all."

An odd brief silence fell upon the room. Looking proudly at his wife Jehu decided that the journey had tired her more than she had confessed. She had shed the conventional mourning for her uncle in honour of their delayed wedding-trip, and against her new blue gown her cheeks showed pale and a trifle drawn.

Robert advanced laughing and took her hand.

"My felicitations, Mistress Poole," he said. "I see that I have surprised you."

"You have almost frightened me, sir!" answered Miriam. "Have you been safe in England all this while and never told your friends?"

"Indeed no! I had actually gone aboard ship when the news reached me of my brother's death. He left me his fortune, and after the business affairs were settled I left England for the Continent, and have but lately returned."

"I have asked him to dine with us, Miriam," struck in Jehu, "and the sooner the dinner comes up the better. Your pardon, sir, I will go and

see what wine the house can offer us." He swung back out of the door, and Miriam, sitting down on a heavy leather-bound chair, motioned Robert to its twin. The first shock of the unexpected meeting had passed, and with it some other and subtler emotion. Four months of marriage with a rich and powerful nature had already changed her outlook upon mankind more deeply than she knew. Robert, re-entering her life even more suddenly than he had left it, stood now in a new setting, in which, for all his polish, he shone less brightly than of yore. The very grace of the man suggested an undisturbed self-satisfaction.

"It was unkind in you, sir, to leave us all at Dorchester ignorant of your news," she said.

"I wrote to the Doctor," replied Robert, "but found the letter undispatched on my return. My servant had forgotten it and it had lain these three years between a cabinet and the wall in my uncle's house, where I discovered it myself. All this while, hearing no word from him, I had been thinking that the Doctor could not forgive me for considering wet sheets an ill cure for the consumption."

He watched the familiar smile come and go in her eyes, then asked for further news than Jehu had supplied of Dorchester.

"There is little change there," answered Miriam. "Old Mr. Glass is dead, and some of the maids are married."

"I intended to re-visit the old place," said Robert, "but now that its chief attraction has come to town I shall put off the journey. I have

collected a few trinkets and ornaments on my tour in the hope of presenting them to Mistress McQueen, but I must now beg her husband's permission to offer them to Mistress Poole."

" You are very kind, sir," replied Miriam, a faint shadow darkening her face. Involuntarily she wondered whether, had she known earlier of that collection and that the collector's thought had turned even so lightly in her direction, her name had ever undergone its change. Instinctively she drew back behind the barrier of class-distinction, allowing a stronger country accent to colour her speech.

" You have seen many a place since you left us," she said, " and Dorchester would be a dull one after Paris and Geneva. You must have seen some fine sights."

" None so fine, after all, as London Town and old friends," he answered, gallantly. " I shall be a contented stay-at-home for the future, and have just purchased a house at Piper's ground, furnished, lock, stock, and barrel, from a gentleman who has come to grief at Will's. In a week or so I hope to give my house-warming and to entertain you both in return for your hospitality to-night."

" You are very kind, sir," repeated Miriam, " but I am afeared that your friends will be above us. You will have gentlemen and ladies there who would laugh at country-folk."

" You do both yourself and your husband an injustice to imagine so," replied Robert reproachfully. " Surely you have not forgotten

your old occupations? I know no other lady who should be better read than Mrs. Poole, nor a cleverer man than Jehu. He has, if I remember rightly, a better library of English authors than any which I have ever seen. While I think of it, had not your uncle some rare old volumes? You have kept them, I trust?"

"He had a few books," said Miriam, colouring slightly, "and they are now my husband's. Jehu has shown me so many more that I feel, whiles, that of the making of books there is no end."

"And much study is a weariness of the flesh—eh?" completed Robert, smiling.

"Why, no," said Miriam composedly, "I am not expected to read them all. The one that I study most is Jehu's own."

"Jehu's own?"

"He will doubtless tell you of it himself," replied Miriam, a little flustered; "he has been writing it for years and it goes to the press quite soon."

"He is a deep dog!" exclaimed Robert, laughing again. "Many's the hour I have spent beside his bookshelves, and yet he never so much as hinted at his own authorship. What kind of book has he written?"

"It is a book of plays and poetry," answered Miriam. "He has spent ten years over it. It is fine, sir! You can hear and see the folk in it, and think yourself among them."

"I hope that he has found a good patron to attract the public attention to his work," said

Robert, "an author needs that above all else nowadays."

"He hopes to do without patronage," replied Miriam proudly. "The printer has accepted it and will introduce it at the clubs."

"Well," answered Robert, "a good dedication to a public leader makes a vast difference to an author's chances of success. I must speak to Poole about it, for I believe that I can introduce him to the very man. And now that we have mentioned your uncle I hope that you believe that I heard nothing of your shocking loss until yesterday, or I had not been so remiss in offering my condolences."

"It was a great loss to me," said Miriam constrainedly. "I owe everything to his kindness."

"He was proud of his niece," said Robert. "Pray forgive me if I pain you, but have the authorities never discovered any clue to the murderer?"

"None," she replied, avoiding his clear eyes and fingering the edge of the table at her elbow. "There were so many smuggling folk who hated him that it is almost impossible to find the right people. It is thought that several must have had a hand in it."

"I hope that they will be caught and brought to justice," said Robert gravely. "Poole, no doubt, has moved heaven and earth to catch them?"

"He has done his best," she answered, "but without success." A latent uneasiness, born of a vague knowledge of her husband's past relation

with contraband, stirred in her mind. It had served to account to her for Jehu's lack of enthusiasm in the hunt for Alexander's murderers. Nothing could disguise the fact that the savage hanging of several members of a noted smuggling gang, which had been brought about chiefly by the agency of the dead exciseman, had set the tide of popular sympathy against him, and had rendered the search for his destroyers both difficult and perfunctory. A faint intonation in Robert Purling's voice implied that he was aware of the fact. She heard the sound of Jehu's returning footsteps with relief.

The dusk was gathering, and he re-entered the room followed by a waiter bearing candles. Shutters were speedily closed and the curtains drawn, the supper laid, and all preparations made for a comfortable evening. Robert had given his audience a detailed account of his travels before he found occasion to turn the conversation to Jehu's literary venture.

"You are a deep fellow, Poole," he remarked. "Your wife has just told me that these ten years you have been writing a book, and have just taken it to the printer."

"So Miriam has betrayed me," replied Jehu, smiling. "Yes, it is true that this has been my ambition, but I had almost lost heart and abandoned it when my lady took me in hand."

"How many volumes will it embrace?" asked Robert. "I suppose that you intend to mix the poems with the plays if they are to form one book?"

"I am leaving that to Murth," answered Jehu. "I wrote to him before coming to Town, and he fixed an appointment for a few hours after our arrival, so that he already has the manuscript."

"You mean Murth of the Strand, I suppose," said Robert. "A good printer and honest, but I fear that Lintot and Tonson have spoilt some of his trade. He is a queer old fellow. Has a corner of his own at the Chapter and sits there daily for an hour or so reading extracts from his new authors to a group of cronies. You might have done better than to choose him, Jehu. I have been telling Mistress Poole that you should look about you for a good patron who commands the clubs' attention, and give him a neat specimen of dedicatory verse at the beginning of your work. If you wish to catch the ears of the Town it is absolutely necessary to catch your patron first. Whig or Tory you have little chance otherwise of a fair hearing."

"I have not writ anything political that I know of," said Jehu drily. "I am neither Whig nor Tory."

"Then, for the purpose of a dedicatory epistle, I advise you to become a Whig, in which case I believe that I can find you the required help," said Robert. "No politics no patron is the present rule in the clubs."

"Then," said Jehu, unperturbed, "I must make shift as best I can. The dedication is already writ and I do not intend to alter it."

"May I ask to whom?"

"To the man who knows 'little Latin and less

Greek,' to the Plain Man," replied Jehu, laughing.

"Ah, well!" said Robert, "I wish you luck, but I fear that your Plain Man abides by the critics and the critics abide by their politics and the Classics, and your merchant will be Whig, and your Squire Tory, and will follow-my-leader into Hades if required to do so. Still, I wish you good fortune with my whole heart, Poole, and if you ever find occasion to change your mind you have only to say the word and I and my friend are altogether at your service. I shall visit the Chapter to-morrow and make old Murth read me your poems. Remember that my friend at the St. James' could make you a name almost in half an hour."

"I thank you," responded Jehu shortly.

A slight damp dropped upon the little party for a minute, but was dispelled immediately by Robert proposing to map out a scheme for his friends' amusement during their sojourn in London. Even Miriam's uneasy heart began to beat with pleasant anticipation, for Robert Purling was well acquainted with the best places of entertainment and speedily drew up a programme that filled her with half fearful delight. The tiny world of Dorchester life began to recede into the background of her thoughts as the two handsome men set themselves to work for her amusement. When at last their guest rose to leave the hour was past nine o'clock.

Jehu conducted him downstairs, and then returning to the mellow glamour of the candle-

light, crushed his wife to him in a laughing bear-like embrace.

"I am going to make you into the finest beauty in Town, lass," he said, releasing her. "The sweetest daintiest loveliest little madam that ever married a Dorset farmer. We are going to spend a hundred pounds as fast as we can."

"O Jehu! But I am not little, you know. I am very tall for a woman. If you were not so big yourself you would know that."

"Then there is all the more for you to deck out, my dear," he replied gaily.

Belowstairs the tavern still held a noisy company, but Mr. Mole had long ago left his seat and paid his reckoning. Robert strode out complacently into the fresh night air, loosening his sword a trifle, for the streets were dark and a chair might not be at once obtainable. As he turned about from the tavern door a slim man in drab collided with him sharply, and rebounded with a shower of apologies.

"A thousand pardons, sir!" he exclaimed, bowing humbly. "Ah! Do I address Mr. John Fibbet?"

"Neither John Fibbet nor John Gibbet, sir," returned Robert, stepping aside. "My name is Purling."

"Your pardon again!" said the man. "I am late for an appointment at this coffee-house with a gentleman of your description whom I have never met before—a matter of urgent business."

"If your business is of a delicate nature, sir," said Robert, eyeing him good-humouredly but

with close attention, “ it is well that you have not introduced yourself to him by a butt in the belly. It might not have prejudiced him in your favour. I wish you good-night ! ”

“ Good-night, sir,” responded the drab individual, and hastened into the Rainbow.

Robert pursued his road quickly, and Mr. Mole retraced his steps to the coffee-room and summoned a waiter.

“ I supped here an hour or so back,” he said, “ and believe that I must have dropped a gold pin from my cravat. Have you noticed one anywhere ? ”

“ No, sir, but we will look for it.”

“ I am pressed for time now,” said Mole, putting a coin into the man’s hand, “ but I will look in to-morrow. Good-night. O, can you tell me whether a gentleman whom I have just met coming out is Mr. Purling, the Barbadoes ship-owner ? ”

“ No, sir. That was his nephew and a gentleman of fortune; one of our new patrons.”

Nodding his thanks for the information, Mr. Mole departed.

An hour later, in a dim bedroom in Wood Street, Westminster, he completed a short letter and went to bed. The letter, lying sealed and addressed on his desk, ready to be carried to the early mail-coach, read as follows :—

“ To Master Stephen King,
“ Landlord of the Three Crows,
“ Muckleford, by Dorchester.

“ Sir,

“ The gentleman with whom you desire me to do business hath come, and is lodged at the place you named. The papers have come safe.

“ Your obd. Serv.,

“ J. M.”

CHAPTER VII

MR. MOLE slept well. He was as compact and thorough in this as in every other affair of his busy life, and combined with the faculty of sound sleep the rarer one of automatically awaking at any given time with a surprising completeness. If a clear conscience is the mother of sound repose John Mole's must have either been singularly crystalline or else non-existent. He plunged into sleep with much the same precipitation as he had plunged into Robert Purling's waist-coat, and was fifty fathoms deep in a dreamless sea of slumber long before Miriam Poole had reached its verge.

She lay in the curtained depths of the Rainbow Tavern's second best bed in no peaceful frame of mind. The long coach journey and the excitement of the evening had tired her thoroughly, but sleep had suddenly become as remote as the stars. London had smitten her at first as something of a nightmare, with its throng of coaches at the end of their run, the pack of foot-passengers, sedans, and carts, the shouts, cries, rattlings, and squalor, and Robert Purling's

sudden re-appearance in her life had added the final note to the confusion that bewildered her tired senses. She had now given up attempting to disentangle the different threads of pleasure and pain in her sensations of the last few hours, and lay, wakeful but apathetic, watching the shuttle of her thought as it danced upon the floor of her mind, weaving a pattern which she was too weary to follow, too wakeful to ignore.

Muffled sounds now and then crept up to her ears from the tavern below, together with an occasional rattle on the cobbles of the street. Presently a chorus of tipsy voices woke the echoes without, and Jehu, turning drowsily, laughed in his sleep. A long silence followed, broken by the chime of St. Dunstan's clock, and the jog-trot of a couple of chairmen, with their accompanying burden and link-boys. This proceeded some little way past the tavern and then came to an abrupt stop. There arose a shout and a scream, the last extremely shrill and penetrating, a man's voice loudly summoning the Watch, and an unmistakable clash of weapons. Miriam, wide awake, shook her husband energetically and proclaimed to him the fact that someone was being robbed in the street. He sat up slowly and listened.

"Mohocks," he remarked sleepily. "There comes the Watch. That chair seems to be well guarded, for the fellows sound as if they are going off."

Echoes of hasty flight verified the supposition. Jehu lay down again and resumed his slumbers.

Miriam, quivering in every nerve, remained sitting up in the blackness, listening to the dwindling noise and shivering as someone most unmistakeably began to groan.

Presently sounds from below indicated that the sufferer had been carried into the house, and she returned to her quest for sleep. It came at last, feverishly mixed with incoherent dreams and brief awakenings.

Morning came, and in the dim light of five o'clock John Mole stood in a crowded coach-yard bidding farewell to a countryman in a dingy smock, whom he called back just as he was moving away in the direction of the Dorchester coach.

"A word of advice, my man," he said grimly. "If you wish to carry out your employer's directions successfully you had better abandon your nautical gait, and remember that you are aboard the Old England, not the Glory Ann. And avoid chewing tobacco as you would the Devil."

The man grinned shrewdly, and, furtively removing a bit of plug from his cheek, climbed to the coach-top. Mr. Mole, after seeing him safely off, went his way.

His way was somewhat devious, involving a visit to a dirty little drinking shop in Gardener's Lane, where a few gin-soaked wretches appeared to have spent the night and to be hiding from the day. Thence he passed on to a small general shop in Pye Street, where he unlocked a side door and proceeded to take down the shutters from an unglazed shop-front. From this it may

be inferred that John Mole was merely one of the countless petty tradesmen of poorer London.

Jehu awoke much refreshed at seven. Leaving Miriam to sleep on he went below for a morning draught and so out into the City.

The day promised to be bright, and a delicate mist was shredding slowly away from the steeples. Shops were opening, street cries beginning, as he strolled contentedly up one side of Fleet Street and down the other, breathing in the mingled odours of the town with more exhilaration than the state of the gutters warranted. Returning at length to the Rainbow he was accosted by a waiter with the surprising information that a young gentleman giving the name of David Smith, who had been wounded last night by the Mohocks, lay in a room on the ground floor and had just expressed a desire to see him. Not a little amazed, Jehu followed the man into a back parlour, where, upon a hastily constructed couch, he beheld, pale, dishevelled, and plainly filled with a mortal terror, Mr. David Dane.

David greeted his friend with shame-faced relief, and as soon as the door had closed behind the waiter, launched into a piteous tale of misadventure, in which fact and fiction appeared to struggle for predominance until Jehu sternly desired him to begin at the beginning and to tell the unadorned truth. This, it transpired, was that David, in a rash moment some weeks earlier, had pledged himself after a tavern dinner to become a member of a small band of amateur desperadoes, and had since found reason to walk

the Town in grievous fear both of the genuine Mohock and of the Watch. Between the two, and the necessity of keeping his secret at home whilst appearing regularly at the meetings, he had lived a life of continual dread. Withdrawal from membership would involve dire misfortune in the shape of a prosecution for debt.

That eventful night had brought matters to a crisis. Being abroad in Fleet Street with the gang at about half-past eleven he had encountered certain of the regular army of Mohocks, and at the same instant had somehow, he could not clearly recollect how, become involved with a sedan-chair containing a lady, escorted by a gentleman on foot and two linkboys. A very pretty fight had ensued, in which everybody seemed to have fought everybody else indiscriminately, so that he could not honestly tell whether he had been hurt in attacking or defending the occupant of the chair. A fortified Watch coming to the rescue the Mohocks and their understudies had both seen fit to decamp, leaving him behind, but, the Watch going in pursuit, he had contrived to crawl to the Rainbow, where a good-natured customer had carried him in. Owing to his general uncertainty of the real course of events that night he had taken refuge in a fictitious name, and now earnestly craved Jehu's help in returning home with some plausible explanation of his state and a friend to corroborate it. The wounds consisted of a couple of gashes, one in the shoulder and the other in the thigh, but they did not appear to be serious

and he had refused to call in a surgeon. He would have asked sooner for Jehu but for continued fainting fits from loss of blood. The debt, admitted David, almost in tears beneath Jehu's merciless cross-examination, was for twenty pounds owed to the landlord of the Rose in Gardener's Lane for the purchase of a sword and pair of pistols, with other small loans and scores. He thought that the settlement of this account, with the addition of five pounds towards the fraternity's common fund, might purchase his liberty if he undertook to hold his tongue and betray nobody, since the leaders of the gang seemed to consider him to be too law-abiding by nature to become a profitable member of the club.

Thus ran the epic of David Dane. Jehu, who had some ado to keep a serious face during its recital, made a mental calculation of the funds which he had brought for his wedding-trip, and which of his personal expenses he could sacrifice without spoiling Miriam's enjoyment, with the result that he thought that he could raise the desired sum on certain conditions. These were that David gave up keeping bad company, scrupulously avoiding debt for the future, and repaid the loan in monthly instalments of one pound. The simplest explanation of his dilapidated return home would be that he had been set upon by Mohocks while on his way to the Rainbow.

All this relation and concoction had taken up some considerable time, and Jehu returned to the

room above to find Miriam dressed, and agitated by the garbled history which a chamber-maid had just recounted to her of a young gentleman who was dying below and had summoned Jehu to his death-bed. Setting her mind at rest and leaving her divided between laughter and dismay, he set out, breakfastless, to hire a hackney coach and conduct the wounded hero home.

The ship-owner's household proved to be in no small ferment, though, fortunately, David's absence from his unused bed had not been noticed until six o'clock that morning. It was now close upon nine o'clock, and Mr. Purling was on the point of setting out personally to scour the city for his errant secretary. He received him and his story with ill-concealed disbelief, and handed him over contemptuously to the care of his scandalized housekeeper.

"Pack o' lies he's been telling you, Poole," he said irritably. "He's a wastrel in the bone, and if I had not promised the lad's father that I'd look after him, he'd have been out from under my roof this many a day. As I told 'ee before, his only recommendation is his handwriting. Now you must breakfast. I'm not above a second meal myself after the trouble over that young jackanapes."

"Thank'ee," replied Jehu, "but I have an appointment at the Chapter and have promised first to take my wife into the Park. By your leave, I must be getting back to her."

"Tut, tut! Eh, well! I hope that you'll be as anxious for your wife's company in five years'

time as you are to-day, my lad. I'll walk with 'ee part of the way as I go to my office."

They walked forth together, and parted at Temple Bar. Miriam had breakfasted alone, and Jehu found her busily frilling a fresh tucker for a gown. She greeted his return with quiet pleasure.

"I am tired, Jehu," she said, when he had eaten his delayed meal and suggested that she should dress and come out; "I would rather walk out later to see the Park, and your business ought to be done first. If you will let me rest now, you can see to it this morning and take me out this afternoon."

He went off light-heartedly, making like a homing bee for the Chapter, while Miriam returned to her hemming.

Miriam's mind was in that condition which often follows over-fatigue. She shrank for the moment from going out to meet any new sights or sensations, and took refuge from her unfamiliar surroundings in the only familiar task to hand, namely a piece of sewing. She stitched industriously, gradually accustoming herself to the room and place, and feeling her way back to the usual orderliness of her everyday thoughts.

The frill was soon finished, and she went into the bedroom to stitch it on to the gown. Her trunk, an old specimen of carved wood and stamped leather which had been her mother's, and which was now protected from rough usage by a stout outer covering of canvas, stood open, revealing the rich folds of her new dresses. She

sat down beside it, selected the one in need of attention, and began to sew in the tucker.

A faint odour of sandal-wood floated up from the open chest, a scent which invariably brought with it to Miriam the recollection of childish days and her mother. In all her memories of Sylvie Mrs. McQueen appeared as the dominating force among those about her, before whom the child shrank in awed obedience. She could recall no instance of tyranny or unkindness on Sylvie's part. Her chief memory was of a reserved kindness marked once or twice by a hot display of affection too startling to be comfortable. One such instance rose now before her mind's eye, suggested by the colour of the topmost of her gowns.

She recalled a wet windy afternoon at Marseilles and a black-panelled living-room showing a glimpse of swaying masts through heavily leaded panes. She sat, a child of seven or eight, huddled up in a blanket by the fire, recovering from a slight feverish attack, and her mother, seated at a bureau on the opposite side of the hearth, with her profile to the child and a background of pale light, was engaged in sorting a number of letters.

Miriam remembered every detail of Sylvie's dress and expression, which held the attention of her faintly fevered mind. Mrs. McQueen wore an old gown of dark purple Lyons silk, relieved only by the creamy white of a falling lace collar. Her hair was dressed after the fashion of her wedding date, ten years earlier, and was drawn

tightly back from her face, leaving a few formal curls across her forehead and falling in heavy ringlets upon her shoulders. She was as richly and darkly coloured as the painting of an old Master, her beauty still able to withstand the test of a style of hair-dressing which was trying even to a young face. Had Miriam known it the warm flush dying her mother's cheeks was the mark of a bitter and suppressed conflict with ever increasing bodily pain.

Sylvie's white fingers sorted her papers rapidly, consigning many of them to the blaze upon the hearth after shredding them carefully to pieces. Presently she paused, sat for a second considering a discoloured parchment, and then, picking up a pen, began to write.

Miriam watched her drowsily, until, with a last firm stroke, she had signed her name. Then, abruptly, her mother rose and crossed to her daughter's chair.

"Thou art feeling better, little one?" she asked, speaking in French.

"Yes, maman," answered Miriam, shyly.

"No more bad pain?"

"No, maman."

"O God, if I were to lose you!"

Sylvie sank suddenly to the ground beside the chair, crushing Miriam's startled face to her shoulder, kissing hands, head and the nape of her neck, with desperate passion. Miriam, frightened and submissive rather than responsive, rested quietly against her until Sylvie as abruptly pushed her back into her seat and rose. The hot

colour had faded from her face, and a blue sharp line ran painfully from nose to mouth. She breathed shortly.

"I forget," she said, standing with a hand upon the high chair-back, "it is not I that shall lose thee. Little heart, will you ever forget your mother, I wonder?"

"But no, maman," said the child, bewildered.

Sylvie laughed drily and moved back to her bureau.

"Ah, well!" she exclaimed, "I shall not be here to know."

Miriam laid the renewed dress back into its place and closed the lid of the trunk. How heavy it was! For the hundredth time she wondered at the awkward curve of the domed lid, which was perfectly flat within, and suggested a shameful waste of space.

She turned the key against the possible curiosity of the chambermaid, and went back to the parlour and a book.

CHAPTER VIII

THE Chapter Coffee-house was not as full as Jehu had expected when he reached it at about eleven o'clock. Patronized chiefly by booksellers and printers it usually collected its patrons for the noontide meal, which was for most of them a hurried affair, and again recalled them in the late afternoon, when the company was more leisured and the talk turned on the latest publications and their commercial value, together with the various subtleties of the art of printing and binding. The atmosphere was hardly literary in the best sense of the word, for the members of the regular côterie were mainly concerned with the saleable quality of their wares, and were contented to follow the fashion of taste set by such clubs as the Grecian, Wills' and Button's in the matter of their more important publications.

A notable exception to this general rule was Master Nathaniel Murth, a little crumpled elderly man, who at the moment of Jehu's arrival sat in his accustomed seat at the end of the long table by the fireplace, waiting for the ordinary which was served at a quarter to twelve, and fill-

ing in the time by reading aloud to a small group of fellow-spirits. His four or five listeners were all seated with their backs to the door, and Nathaniel, though facing them, was too intent upon his reading, and too short-sighted, to observe the author's entry.

"Now, gentlemen," he was saying, in his soft dramatic voice, "we come to a song, which Polly Rose sings to Sir Harry. I consider it rarely dainty, and am anxious to hear your opinions. Ahem!

''' In windy March he came to woo
 With hose of red and feather blue,
 Delighted and elated ;
 So April saw the matter through
 And Summer saw them mated.
 September tipped her tongue with frost
 October blackened his hosen ;
 November found the couple lost,
 December found them frozen.
 Then toll the bell and sadly move,
 We'll take a spade and bury love.

''' So woo in winter and be wise ;
 The faithful love and marriage prize
 Are for the winter comer.
 The heart's that's warm 'neath snowy skies
 Will never freeze in summer.
 October woo, November win,
 December kiss and marry,
 So shut Dan Cupid safely in
 And clip his wings—Sir Harry !
 So peal the bells and gaily move,
 We'll take a ring and marry love !'''

"Gentlemen, your opinion ! Is not Polly Rose the sauciest little mischief that ever enticed a fellow into matrimony, and her song the neatest of snares ? Imagine the scene, and the little

minx at her instrument with the dowager frowning and the young misses, her sisters, tittering, and Sir Harry obliged to fix the date of the wedding at last and take her in spite of her poverty. Observe how neatly the author has worked up to the situation, from the moment that Sir Harry enters with my lady his mother to the moment when she thinks to cut short their love-making by requesting Polly Rose to sing. In my opinion it is very well done."

"Very neat indeed," commented the nearest critic.

"Your opinion, Hessiter?" repeated Nathaniel, addressing another.

"A very tidy scene," replied Hessiter, a shrewd-eyed individual in a shabby wig. "But the play is neither, properly speaking, a comedy nor a tragedy, and the public taste at present is for one or the other; funeral pyres or erring husbands and hoodwinking wives."

"Well, you must remember that the author desires to publish the play with his poems, rather to be read than acted," said Nathaniel.

"He is entirely unknown, you say," broke in another speaker, a dapper hard-featured man in brown. "Have you advised him to find a patron at Wills'? I fear the stuff is hardly in accordance with classic taste. It smacks too much of English models to please the men of letters, and the true English stage is at present under a cloud. The Town is all for Opera. Button's has become severely classical, though I have heard a good Whig win great applause there for

some shocking poor eclogues. Is your fellow Whig or Tory? So far what you have read gives us no hint."

Nathaniel Murth groaned aloud.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," he protested, "cannot you enjoy a good song without knowing the writer's political convictions? I believe that he professes to have none. Now listen. Here is a fragment from the supposed lament of a Roman matron whose child has been slain by the Goths. I doubt if it follows the best classical traditions, but it ought to stir Euripides himself." He shuffled the manuscript impatiently, and resumed his reading.

"Ye thundering Gods of battle, can ye hear
The tortured infant's shriek, the mother's cry?
Damned Gods of carnage, ye shall shrink in fear
When Man's true Justice treads the court on high!
Drunk Gods of high Olympus, Gods of Greece,
Fall to your doom amid the tombs of Rome!
When the red sword is sated, then comes Peace
And Justice, striding o'er the shattered home.' "

The hard-featured critic still appeared to be unimpressed. Nathaniel, glaring a challenge at him over the rim of his spectacles, suddenly noticed Jehu standing by the door, and at the same instant the figure of Robert Purling entered and tapped the author on the shoulder.

"I am late, Poole," he commented, "but as I approached the door from the landing I was fortunate enough to catch part of that last verse. Murth, will you do me the favour of reading it again?"

Nathaniel obliged, still palpably bristling. Robert stood listening intently with his hand still resting on Jehu's arm. Jehu, slightly ill at ease, waited for his verdict, the verdict of one to whom the mysteries of Greek and Latin were his natural element.

"That last line is good, Jehu," he commented.

"Justice, striding o'er the shattered home."

"Very good. We will not now discuss the question of whether a mother in the first agony of bereavement would express herself so eloquently. For the sake of the drama, folk are obliged to express themselves eloquently, and the point is foreign to dramatic criticism. Favour us with some more, Murth."

Nothing loath the printer, rejoicing in a sympathetic listener, continued his recital, Robert advancing to the table with Jehu and the group making room for them with deference. The place was gradually filling up, and a small crowd began to collect about them, struck by the extraordinary size of the countryman and the handsome well-breeding of his friend, no less than by the delighted emphasis of Murth, who was rapidly becoming oblivious to everything except the poem before him, which he declaimed exceedingly well and with keen appreciation of its best points.

In some respects the production was without doubt crude. Jehu had not sought to polish it very highly, but had left it for what he intended

it to be, the hotly uttered, hotly conceived expression of intense emotion. It was undeniably dramatic, and as undeniably set many of the classical rules at defiance. Here and there the dialogue dropped into the unmistakable dialect of Dorsetshire, but if the unities were faulty the characters lived and breathed, and under Murth's skilful handling held the close attention of his hearers to the end. A short round of applause greeted the close of the poem, Nathaniel pushing up his glasses and glancing round his augmented audience with a look of triumph before fixing his eyes on Jehu's face.

"Come," exclaimed a burly city man, who had stopped entranced, on his way to a distant seat. "If the playhouse would give me a play like that I'd go back to it again. There has not been a play produced to stir a man's blood since Congreve died, and your operas, *Ariadne* and *Dido* and the like, are above me. Here's the stuff I like, and nothing in it to offend the wife, either, for all she reads Mr. Collier."

"The verdict of the Plain Man, to whom my book is dedicated," said Jehu, smiling and glancing about at the friendly faces. He had so far passed safely through his first ordeal of club criticism, and felt that he had chosen his arena wisely. In what other would he have stood before the Plain Man unchoked by the Great?

Nathaniel Murth clapped the manuscript down excitedly. "Gentlemen," he cried, "I propose that those of us here who can enjoy a poem or a play without bothering our heads about Greek

tragedies, people like our friend who has just spoken,"—the citizen bowed—"unite to help Mr. Poole here in catching the ear of the Town. I am willing to publish his book. Will you undertake to read it, and when you have read it to find it fresh readers? Let us leave Button's and the Grecian alone, for once. Mr. Poole has not writ for them. He has writ for the plain Englishman, something better than Curril's obscenities or Stephen Duck's pretensions, or the penny pamphlets and the Gentleman's Magazine. Let us leave the men of letters out of the matter altogether, and publish and spread a book for our own enjoyment. Let the critics criticize it as they will; *we* know what we enjoy and what our wives will enjoy, and that's a song with a good lilt to it, a play that sets a family laughing in one act and weeping in the next, and a poem that makes little Tom put on a paper hat and call himself a soldier. Do you not agree with me, gentlemen?"

"I do that," said the townsman emphatically, while several others murmured assent but seemed unwilling to express individual opinions.

"Well then, sir," said Nathaniel, extending a friendly hand across the board to Jehu, "that is a bargain."

"Well said, Murth," said Robert Purling, lightly. "I will act as witness to any written agreement to that effect. It is always well to have something of the sort in a business matter, as you know, and if the book sells well, as it will if the City is caught by it, the profits

will naturally be shared between author and publisher. Suppose that we draw up the agreement now? So much down to my friend, Mr. Poole, so much commission on the sale of the book. What think you, Poole?"

"I should be glad of it if Mr. Murth will agree," replied Jehu.

Nathaniel Murth seemed to be a trifle disconcerted. Somebody in the background sniggered.

"That is fair enough," agreed Nathaniel, after a barely perceptible pause, "but we must go further into the details of the matter first. We had better discuss them after dinner. You will dine here now, Mr. Poole?"

"I must return to my wife to-day," replied Jehu. "Perhaps it would be better to call upon you to-morrow. I shall be free then at two o'clock. Could you accompany me, Mr. Purling?"

"Why, certainly!" said Robert. "Will the time suit you, Murth?"

"Make it half-an-hour earlier and dine with me at my house," said Nathaniel. "I will bring a friend of mine to see us clench the bargain, so that we shall have a witness apiece. I hope that will satisfy you, Mr. Purling?"

"Perfectly," replied Robert suavely. "We are old acquaintances, Mr. Murth, and I hope have every confidence in each other's honesty, but business is business, you know, as you once remarked to me eight years since over the matter of a translation from Vergil. You remember?"

"I remember the occasion very clearly, sir,"

responded the printer with a wry smile, " and I also remember that I lost a clear twenty-five pounds over the transaction."

" Ah, well, you could spare it better than I," answered Robert pleasantly. " I am dining here, Poole. Are you obliged to go?"

" Mrs. Poole will be waiting for me," replied Jehu. " Thank you, gentlemen, for your indulgence to an unknown author. Mr. Murth has summed up my ambition better than I could have done it myself. I leave the rest to your good-nature."

He bowed to the assembly and went out, conscious of a rising buzz of comment and question among the members as he left.

He strode along trying to realize that at last his foot was set upon the first rung of the ladder which he sought to climb, but the attempt failed. It was too good to be true. The raw stuff of his dreams actually rang true to the critics of the Chapter tribunal, but, as business men, were they really prepared to help Murth, the eccentric, and an utterly unknown country-man, into fame and profit? Would the majority of the club members remember the matter to-morrow? Could Nathaniel be depended upon to keep them up to the mark until the publication had received sufficient impetus to take its own chances? Was his encouraging enthusiasm merely the mood of the moment, which would pale before the risk of losing cash? Jehu felt that he hardly knew Murth well enough to tell, though he had been a friend of his father's and Jehu had long ago

made him the one confidant of his ambition, other than Miriam.

The problem of this, and what terms he intended to bring forward on the following day, supplied him with much food for thought.

CHAPTER IX

“I AM alive!” said Miriam Poole.

She was walking along the Mall on her husband’s arm upon a warm morning of early May when she made the remark, and Jehu, who from force of habit was humming an air from last night’s Opera and was in momentary danger of bursting into open melody, checked himself to reply whimsically, “Not a doubt of that, my dear! You have kept us all busy.”

“Have I, Jehu?” She glanced up at him merrily from beneath the brim of her hat. “Well, that is good for ‘ee. Ye’d have been a rare old bachelor in another year, and I was half dead when ye married me, man!” The fingers tightened on his arm as she spoke, and he was filled with an insane desire to stop and kiss his wife publicly then and there.

“I’ve never been young before,” she continued, more seriously, “not young to count, you know. Now I want to dance all down the Mall.

Jehu, if you sing out loud like that all the folk will stare at us!"

"Dance away!" replied Jehu. "I'll supply the tune, and we'll give 'em zummat to stare at!"

He made as though to free his arm, but she clung to it, laughing.

Life, indeed, had suddenly become amazingly enjoyable for them both. Miriam had soon shaken off the dismayed bewilderment of her first days in Town, and a very pleasant friendship had sprung up between herself and the elder Purling, to whose house they were at that moment bound by a roundabout route suggested by the attractiveness of the morning. Robert Purling senior was a musician of some merit, and a little company of fellow amateurs collected weekly for a small concert at the house in S. James' Street. Jehu, fiddle-case under arm, was on his way to rehearse with the elder Purling, and he and Miriam were to be introduced to Monsieur and Madame de Nivers, Mr. Robert's French friends, who had but recently returned from a visit to the country.

The Mall was already filled with fashionable loungers, chiefly, at that hour, gentlemen who were either filling in time before assembling at the clubs by sauntering up and down the walk, or else were on their way to or from some great man's morning levée. Miriam, walking briskly beside her massive husband, attracted no little notice from these wandering gentry. She had profited by her husband's generosity in choosing

her town finery well and without the usual crude taste of a country girl. Her gay flowered gown and small black hat, white cap-frill beneath its brim, became her excellently, and her face glowed freshly from its frame of dark curls. Several blasé gentlemen recovered a temporary interest in things mundane at her approach, and followed discreetly, one eye upon her escort, in the hope of a slightly closer inspection of the new beauty.

“ So ye’re happy, my lass,” resumed Jehu, ending his stave in an undertone, “ not sorry that ye took me and wishing that ye’d married a smart young fellow like the beau just behind us? Ah! I thought ye’d look round at that! ”

He chuckled joyously, and Miriam gave his arm a shake.

“ Such a terrible old rake, Jehu! ” she protested. “ How could you say such a thing! ”

“ Best foot foremost, child,” replied her husband, “ or your gallivanting will make us late.”

They quickened their pace, and speedily arrived at Mr. Purling’s house, where they were shown into the music-room, and found the elder and younger Purlings in company with a small, plump, upright, black-eyed, white-haired woman of sixty, whom Mr. Purling introduced as Madame de Nivers. It appeared that they were waiting for Monsieur, who had promised to follow on. Robert, who played no instrument, sat placidly on a settee by the wall. Madame, when the introductions were completed, took her

seat at the spinet and began to talk in voluble broken English to Jehu, who wished to tune his violin. Robert, who had relieved Miriam of her light scarf and handed her to a seat beside him, smiled amiably and addressed her in an undertone.

“ Madame de Nivers is a wonderful woman, Mrs. Miriam,” he said; “ she has contrived to keep the secret of youth although she has been married for forty-seven years to Monsieur. He is even more wonderful in his way; I am commonly at a loss to know how much of his composition, soul and body, actually *is* M. de Nivers.”

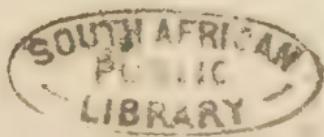
“ What do you mean, Mr. Robert?”

“ Ah, dear lady, wait until you behold him!”

The door opened again, on the words, and Miriam caught her breath in a tiny gasp of dismay, as the beau who had attracted Jehu’s attention in the Mall was ushered formally into the meeting.

Monsieur de Nivers was a thin old gentleman of seventy-odd, elaborately dressed, with many frills of fine lace at throat and wrists, much jewellery, an immense curled wig, and a wizen, rheumy countenance, not guiltless of rouge. Jehu flung a smiling glance at his wife, and the old gentleman bowed expansively. The ship-owner hastened forward.

“ Ah, Monsieur, here you are! We were afraid that you had been hindered from coming. Here is your guitar. Ah, yes. Mistress Poole, M. de



Nivers, Mr. Poole. Now to practice, to practice!"

"Madame," said M. de Nivers, ignoring the ship-owner and the proffered instrument alike, "I rejoice. I beheld you afar just now, and feared that you had but flashed across my firmament to vanish from it again."

His English was almost perfect, his voice not unmusical, and his compliment, despite its extravagance, inoffensive, yet there was something so repulsive about the man, vaguely suggestive of physical as well as mental uncleanness, that Miriam felt herself grow pale as he bowed over her hand. She murmured a confused response and was relieved when the Frenchman turned away and took his place in the circle of musicians. Here he sat like some grotesque figure in porcelain, with his guitar on his knees and his bony fingers plucking at the strings.

"We are to be the audience," whispered Robert. Then, as the piece began in earnest, after a preliminary canter, he added, "Are they not a strange pair?"

"What are they doing over here?" queried Miriam. "Madame is very handsome."

Robert shrugged his shoulders.

"I met them during the tour, in Paris," he said, "and at that time Monsieur was under the wing of a wealthy political Duke and somewhat in favour at Court. Since then he has fallen into some disgrace, and they are sojourning over here until the clouds roll by. He, as you see, is a

musical monkey; nevertheless he is a clever man. She is a kind-hearted and valiant soul, and was wed to him when she was sixteen."

The practice proceeded, Mr. Purling conducting besides playing a violin, and drilling the three others with ruthless enthusiasm. Monsieur twanged his guitar very daintily, and with remarkable effect, but Miriam could not attend to the music for gazing at the amazing little tableau which he made. At last Madame de Nivers lifted her hands from the spinet, and a servant appeared with a tray of refreshments. Robert rose punctiliously and congratulated the performers.

"Excellent," he said. "I assure you, excellent. You must all of you come frequently to play at my house. I plan to hold my housewarming on Tuesday week."

"So soon, Robert?" remarked Mr. Purling. "Well, well, you'll soon be setting up a wife into the bargain."

Robert shook his head.

"I fear not, sir," he said regretfully. "I have missed the only chance of winning one to my mind. Jehu, my mighty musician, I bear you a grudge for ever." He laughed, clapping Jehu on the shoulder, and Miriam, angry with herself, knew that she blushed suddenly beneath the glance of his cool, irresponsible blue eyes.

"Mrs. Miriam," he continued, "did I not promise you yesterday to teach you a minuet for the occasion? What d'ye say to taking your lesson now, with Madame to play the tune in her kindness?"

Miriam glanced uneasily at Jehu, but he was smiling; then at Mr. Purling, who was putting his violin to bed and paid no attention. Mme. de Nivers nodded pleasantly.

"A ver' good idea, M. Robert," she said. "Madame Poole mus' not be shy. Eh, but look, Madame! You have dancing feet! They could never be happy resting still when the musicians were playing, and M. Robert is a ver' good dancing-master."

"At it, my dear, and show them your quickness to learn," struck in Jehu encouragingly. Madame's plump fingers wandered into a little tinkling melody, which trickled across the room in a pretty stream of sound and caught Miriam by the toes. She had danced country dances at Dorchester, but the sophisticated minuet was as yet unknown to her.

She stood up, and Robert led her out into a patch of sunlight in the middle of the floor.

"One, two, t'ree!" counted Mme. de Nivers. "Curtsey!" and the lesson began. Jehu, his back to the wall, watched attentively, and slowly his expression changed from smile to gravity as he watched.

The motes danced gaily about the moving figures, and Miriam, flushed, shy, yet absorbed in her task, glowed like a warm bright jewel in a setting of silvery music. Once, twice, they trod through the measure, and the third time, her attention being less centred on her feet, she looked up and beheld her partner's quizzical

gaze. Her cheeks burnt with sudden confusion, and on the instant her glance flew to her husband, and beheld a momentary anger in his face. It fled as swiftly as it had come, but for a second her heart leapt uncomfortably into her throat at that first fleeting glimpse of the Poole temper. Her colour died down and she finished the lesson in cold silence. Madame de Nivers, peeping over the top of the spinet, commented softly to herself under her breath.

“Eh, mon Dieu!” breathed Madame de Nivers, “our giant is jealous! Madame must be wary!”

Miriam and Jehu walked some paces of their homeward journey in silence. As they re-entered the Park Miriam ventured on speech.

“Jehu! Art angry with me for dancing with Mr. Robert? ’Twas you made me!”

“I am angered with myself, lass, that I cannot dance a minuet.”

“Learn it now, and I will dance it with no other.”

“It is over late in the day, my dear. Would you make me into a dancing-bear?”

“Well,” she retorted, her hand on his arm, “that is better than a common bear or a jealous bear.”

“All bears,” he replied, smiling suddenly, “can hug.”

She looked up at him, startled, and for a moment visualized his broad shoulders and mighty arms crushing mercilessly about some

hapless opponent. A responsive spirit of bravado leapt to life within her.

“Bear, bear!” she said softly. “I am big enough to hold my own!”

CHAPTER X

IN the back premises of the attic floor of the general shop in Pye Street John Mole sat alone behind a locked door and closely examined a number of papers which lay spread out before him on a plain uncovered deal table.

The room in which he sat was small, with a sharp north light, clean, and bare of all furniture save a truckle bed, a chair, and the before-mentioned table. A square wooden box with a strong lock stood, open, on the floor at his side, and its contents might have puzzled a casual observer. They comprised a variety of inks of varying intensity of blackness, a bundle of carefully-cut quill-pens, and several sheets of plain paper mellowed with a yellow tinge as of age. The documents which lay before him might also have proved to be a momentary puzzle to the uninitiated, for they were set out in pairs, each pair precisely alike in apparent age and detail. Mole studied them with the self-congratulation of an expert.

“A good bit o’ work, them,” he muttered,

moving a magnifying glass over the last page. "I'd almost be troubled myself to sort the true from the false if I was to mix 'em up. Dried and settled beautiful, and a long job it's been, too. I thought when I left 'ee yesterday ye'd be satisfactory, but ye're perfect, my beauties!"

He gathered up one of each pair, made the bunch into a neat packet and dropped it into the box, which he closed and double-locked. The papers which remained upon the table he examined once again, with lingering pride, then folded them carefully in the shabby creases which already marked them, tied them with a faded silk cord, and dropped them into his wallet. Then he stood up and yawned.

"King shall pay through the nose for this job," he said half aloud, "but he came to the right quarter. Still, 'tis a foolish thing to try to hound the feller out of the country merely for spite. No, I'm doubting that! He must be a serious menace to those two, King and Heal. Well, that's the last bit of dangerous work that I do, after I've settled my own score, and mebbe I'm a fool not to let sleeping dogs lie myself; but they've slept a deal too long!"

He pushed the box under the bed and went out, locking the door behind him. A few minutes later saw him threading his light-footed way toward the Rainbow Tavern.

It was mid-day, and the meat-puddings were in evidence. Mr. Mole, by now a familiar sight to the waiters, took his customary seat, gave his

customary order, and then inquired whether there was a bedroom vacant anywhere in the house for a couple of nights. There was one, the waiter informed him, on the second floor; a small bedroom next to the second-best guest-chamber. Mr. Mole implied that he had heard a rumour to that effect, and that it would suit him to take it for that night and the one following, and sent word to the landlord. By the time his meal was ended he had engaged the apartment, and left the table to inspect it.

It was certainly a small chamber, and rather over-filled by the bedstead, but it appealed strongly to Mr. Mole's fancy when his quick eyes noticed a locked door which apparently communicated with the adjoining room. A while later there appeared a small boy with a small portmanteau, which was bestowed in a corner of Mr. Mole's new quarters and remained unopened until the attendant had withdrawn and the tenant was by himself and had locked himself into his solitude. His first action, thereupon, was to lay an ear to the dividing door and to listen intently.

There was no sound from the guest-chamber. Mr. Mole unstrapped his portmanteau and drew out a bag of tools. Kneeling cautiously, he applied first an eye and then a tool to the lock and in a few minutes he pushed it open a fraction of an inch and listened again. A thick curtain of velvet hung over the inner side of the door, and against the curtain stood some large and heavy weight. Very cautiously Mole drew aside

a scrap of the intervening material and peered round it.

He saw an empty, heavily-furnished room, opening into a sitting-room beyond, which appeared to be as deserted as the bedroom. Apparently the set had once consisted of three rooms, of which his own had been the third and smallest. Pushing the portière more boldly aside, he looked down at the heavy obstacle before it, and beheld a large wedding-chest of Flemish origin, from which a protecting cover of canvas had been removed and now lay in a heap on the floor beside it. The lid was dome-shaped and bound by ribs of some fine-grained wood studded with dull silver nails. Between the ribs were curved panels, quaintly carved and ornamented. John Mole breathed a breath of surprise.

"The very spit of my mother's!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Miriam's, I presume, but we'll soon see." He slipped through the door and over the trunk with cat-like agility and knelt to examine the fastenings of the latter.

"Lock damaged," he muttered. "Was ever such luck? Now, as to the inside. Does a similar panel exist, and does she know the secret of it?" He raised the lid, and inhaled the aroma of sandal-wood appreciatively. Swiftly he tapped along the inside of the flattened surface, and presently found that for which he sought. A small panel, one of the several squares of stamped leather which lined the interior, fell softly into his hand, and he slipped eager fingers

into the cavity behind it. They encountered a string of beads, which he drew forth.

“Prut!” said John Mole, disgusted, “a Rosary! I expected pearls! Well, does the lady know of this? I fancy not, judging by the condition of the panel. At any rate I’ll risk it, and leave it loose enough to fall out with a shake. The sooner I’m rid of these the better.” He opened his wallet, extracted the packet which it contained, and thrust the latter into the hollow of the chest-lid, replacing the panel lightly. He shut down the lid with care, returned by the route along which he had come, closed and re-locked the dividing door, and wiped his brow.

“The devil’s own luck,” he sighed, and went down below.

* * * * *

In the clear, cool, pleasant May evening Jehu and Miriam set out for Piper’s Ground at about seven o’clock, Miriam slightly oppressed by her new voluminous gown, trepidant but radiant, Jehu, who had meekly submitted to the attentions of a fashionable barber, for once in his life self-conscious.

The house which Robert had taken over from the unlucky gamester was new, and considerably more important than the restricted if fashionable home of the senior Purling. He seemed, also, to have a surprisingly large circle of smart acquaintances. Miriam’s heart sank a little as they passed through the hands of flunkeydom up to

the crowded reception-room. Jehu's mouth grew grim. "If he has brought us here to make fools of us he shall pay for it!" he vowed silently, but the suspicion proved groundless.

Robert received them cordially, and in a few minutes Miriam had become the embarrassed centre of a friendly group.

Presently Mme. de Nivers, detaching herself from her husband's side with undisguised relief, made her way across the room.

"Your pardon, Madame Poole, but are you not the daughter of Mlle. Sylvie de Lomagne?" inquired the Frenchwoman. "You do resemble her so much, and M. Robert 'ave told me that you did be Mlle. Macween. My frien' did marry a Scotsman of that name."

"Yes, madame," replied Miriam eagerly. "My mother was a Mlle. de Lomagne, and my father Captain Nichol McQueen. He was killed in the Rebellion of '15."

Mme. de Nivers sank down comfortably upon a handy couch, making space for Miriam beside her.

"You are very like your mother, Madame Poole," she said, "but—pardon—not quite so beautiful. I have never seen any Mademoiselle to match her, and I do not marvel that your father ran away with her. I have been think, think, thinking who it could be that you did remind me of."

"I never knew that they eloped!" cried Miriam. "That would be why we never saw

aught of her family and why Uncle McQueen adopted me. I was ten years old when she died, in the year of the plague at Marseilles. She did not die of the plague, though, and she was beautiful to the last. "I was afraid of her," she added naïvely.

Madame de Nivers laughed.

"Yes, Sylvie was very tall and had great dignity," she said. "I was twelve year the older, but I was sometimes afraid of her, though I was a married woman when she was almost a bébé. I have lived at Lyons for many years, indeed I was born there, and her father and mother were very kind to me. When I was a lonely little orphan I did almost spend all my time with them, and I was there when Sylvie eloped with her Scotsman."

"You were in the house, Madame?"

"Ah, no, but in the city, and I went at once to see them and to comfort her cousin."

"Her cousin, Madame? Remember, if you please, that I never heard a word of my mother's family except that the de Lomagnes were great people."

"Almost the proudest in France," answered Madame, smiling, "Princes de Verdun, Comtes d'Armagnac and de Lomagne, Vicomtes de Gascogne, and a dozen of other titles into the bargain; descendants from the ancient Kings of France; but your grandfather, like mine, was but a silk-merchant of Lyons. Your mother's cousin, of whom I spoke, was another Sylvie, the

daughter of M. de Lomagne's sister. His sister married an Englishman, whose name I did never hear; it was forbid to be mentioned, for he deserted his wife, and after she die M. de Lomagne did adopt *her* little Sylvie to bring up with his own. We did call her Sylvette to distinguish. She did join the Benedictine nuns at Fontevrault soon after Sylvie eloped, and she is with them to this day."

"Is my grandfather alive?"

"No; both he and Madame de Lomagne did die in the same year as Sylvie. The messenger who carried them the news from Marseilles did carry them the plague also."

Miriam shivered, recalling vaguely the stricken city from which her English uncle, with much difficulty, had removed her. The plague, at that time, had not reached its height, or they might not have been permitted to leave the place at all. She sat silent for a moment, absorbing this fragment of her family history.

"Then I have no relations to count," she said at length, "but a cousin in a convent and others too grand to know me."

"Ah," cried Madame de Nivers, indicating Jehu, now fully at ease and in animated converse with a knot of gentlemen, "but you 'ave a husban' magnifique!"

"But do you know, Madame," answered Miriam, laughing, "that he has no relations either save an old cousin, who keeps house for us in Dorsetshire."

Madame studied her face, smiling drily.

" You are the better off," she said. " I 'ave no relation of my own left to me, but M. de Nivers, 'e 'ave too many. I believe that we could see the half of them dr-rown and not mind at all ! "

In another room the music of violins began, and immediately their host led over to Miriam a gentleman of the name and title of Sir Seymour Smith, who desired the honour of the first minuet. He proved, on closer acquaintance, to be an alderman of the City, a maltster by profession, a grossly flattering partner, and an obsequious hanger-on of the more exclusive titles adorning the assembly. Robert, with the best grace in the world, whatever his inward regrets at the duty, opened the dance with the most important guest of the evening, to wit, a grim lady in crimson. Miriam, for the first time in her life, found herself standing up with only one or two other couples to dance before the eyes of a London audience. She flashed a nervous glance at Jehu, who leant, watching, against the wall, met his reassuring smile, and found herself obediently moving in time with the music and her partner. Shyly, with heightened colour but with outward self-possession, she trod through the measure, while the buzz of conversation around the room died down and critical chaperons followed every movement of the little group of dancers. It was an ordeal which made her, for one wild moment, long frantically for the safe solitude of the Downs Farm; then she caught the reassuring gaze of

Mme. de Nivers, smiling comfortably from her couch, and the second's panic fled away. The violins melted delicately into silence and there followed a tiny rustle of applause.

Jehu made his way hurriedly to her side.

"Well done, lassie!" he said, patting her shoulder, and leading her away from her astonished partner, allowing her only time for the briefest of curtsies. A lady near tittered, and Miriam became burningly aware of the amused scrutiny of several pairs of eyes. The annoyance drove the recollection of her recent conversation with Madame de Nivers from her mind, and she bit her lip to check the first indignant words which rose to her tongue.

Dawn was near to breaking when the party ended, and after the hot rooms the early twilight felt chilly. Miriam, although her irritation with Jehu had speedily given place to an amused satisfaction in his jealous devotion, was in no mood for conversation as she was carried home, her husband walking beside the chair, but when they stood once more in the inn-parlour she raised a sleepy adorable face and kissed him.

"Jehu," she said, "thou didst forget thy manners this evening. Sir Seymour Smith must think us a rare country couple, but I am too weary to scold thee."

"It was a pleasure to see thee dance, lass," he answered, "but the fellow gave himself such intolerable airs that I could not endure to watch him stand longer beside thee."

" You well-nigh made your wife a laughing-stock," retorted Miriam, dropping the country accent, " but she will scold you to-morrow."

She moved off to the inner room, but returned a few minutes later in her petticoat.

" My trunk will not open for me to put my gown away," she said sleepily, " the lock we have just had mended is stuck again."

" Lay your gown on a chair," replied Jehu, " and go to bed. I will see to the box."

She obeyed willingly, and after the curtains had closed about her he pulled the trunk into the sitting-room and bent over the fastening. It yielded to his sudden onslaught, and, opening it, he saw with surprise that a panel in the sandal-wood lining of the domed lid had fallen out, revealing a small cavity, from which protruded a corner of paper.

Putting in his hand he drew out a packet of old letters.

He turned to the light of the candles upon the mantelpiece, and gazed amazedly at the bold black caligraphy of the topmost document, the unmistakable handwriting of his own father, Oliver Poole. Wondering, he untied the faded cord which bound the bundle together and began to read.

The candles flickered down to their sockets, throwing wavering shadows over the yellow papers. In the inner room Miriam lay sleeping profoundly, curtained about by the great bed. By the fireplace stood Jehu Poole, with the frozen

stare of a man who, pushing his way gaily through the leafage of a summer wood, has come face to face with Horror.

CHAPTER XI

IT was seven o'clock in the morning. The working population of London was awake and abroad again, and Robert Purling, always a light sleeper, had already begun to rouse from his short rest, and lay idly studying the moulding of the ceiling above his head. Contrary to custom he preferred to sleep uncurtained, and the mahogany poles of the four-post bedstead on which he lay rose undraped about him.

The shutters were open, and the day, though inclined to greyness, was cheerful with the scolding of innumerable sparrows. A cat sat upon his outer sill, washing her ears in comfortable disregard of the thirty-foot drop below her.

The household, disorganized by the dissipations of the night, was not yet astir, but of a sudden a bell, and that one which Robert recognized as belonging to the front door, pealed loudly through the quiet house. He raised himself in bed, listening attentively.

There was a silence, broken at length by a second peal, and then by an answering tread from the footmen's quarters. Followed the shooting

back of bolts and bars and sounds of muffled conversation, then two pairs of feet coming along the landing.

"Now who the devil can that be?" queried Robert drowsily. "In the old days I should have been under the bed in a twinkling, expecting a dun."

A dishevelled man-servant knocked and entered.

"Mr. Poole asks to see you, sir," he said; "he has come on urgent business."

"The devil!" repeated Robert, with some asperity, and then, more good-humouredly, "Well, show him in."

The man stepped back, making way for the early visitor, at the sight of whom Robert gave vent to an exclamation of startled concern.

Jehu, his bushy hair escaping from the queue into which the barber had compressed it the day before, came heavily into the room. His square face seemed to have become on a sudden gaunt, his high hooked nose appearing more prominent than ever. His black eyes glittered strangely, as though their owner were holding himself in hand with difficulty.

"What the devil's the matter, Poole?" exclaimed Robert, indicating a chair.

Jehu sat down, and he noticed that he shook for a moment like a man in an ague. But for knowing him to have been entirely sober overnight Robert would have jumped at the first explanation of his condition which sprang to mind.

“Mr. Purling,” said Jehu at length, after seeming to wait until he had mastered himself enough to speak coherently, “I think that I have been well-nigh mad this night. When we returned to the Rainbow my wife found that the lock of her trunk had hampered. After she was asleep I forced it open.” He paused, as though seeking for words, then continued speaking more steadily. “It is an old chest and belonged to her mother. We had often noticed the waste of space in the lid, which is curved outside but flat within. I told—Miriam—once that it must hold some secret hollow, but I could not find one until last night, when the blow that I gave it shook open a panel in the wooden lining, and these were behind it.” He laid a packet of papers on the quilt and leant forward, his face working painfully. “God! Mr. Purling, sir, my first impulse was to burn them, but that would not destroy the duplicates abroad and any day the truth might come to light. I have spent the night since I found them—thinking—and I remembered that Monsieur de Nivers and his wife are natives of Lyons and might at any time stumble on the facts which those papers have shown me. As a gentleman, their friend and ours, I have been moved to come to you for advice, even though”—(here the great hand which he rested on Robert’s coverlet clenched momentarily)—“I have hated you of late.”

“Egad, Poole!” said Robert, startled into full wakefulness, “I am amazed. What d’ ye mean?”

"Read those papers and you will understand," said Jehu briefly, turning away his chair.

Robert lifted the topmost, and a second later straightened his back, with a sound of dismay. The letter, dated from a London coffee-house upon the tenth day of June A.D. 1694, ran as follows:—

"To Monsieur Lukis de Lomagne, of Lyons.

"Monsieur,

"In replye toe youre letter, which has but nowe come toe mee, I doe deepeley mourne the death of my late wyfe, youre sister, butte as for oure daughtere, iffe as youe doe saye you desire toe keepe ande toe adopte her for youre owne I am willinge toe have itte soe upon youre agreemente, toe witte, that I doe make noe claime upponne her, nowe nor atte anye tyme and doe suffer her toe take youre name. I will, therefore, syne anye Dockimente the whyche youre lawyer shall sende mee, and wille make noe other claime upon my wyfe's inheritance than thatte whyche I have already received.

"I am, Monsieur,

"Youre obedient servt.,

"OLIVER POOLE."

This was accompanied by a French translation, written in a clear nervous hand which reappeared in the next letter, an answer to the first, composed in halting English and dated a month later.

“ To Master Oliver Poole,

“ atte the Pelican Coffee-house,

“ Ludgate Hill, London.

“ Sir,

“ I have receive yourre letters ande doe sende thysse by the hande of mye lawyer, Monsieur Beaupergne of thysse city, with a paper of adoptionne, the whyche must bee syned in presence of witnesse, Monsieur Beaupergne ande Englisshe lawyer. Toe you, monsieur, I have no more toe saye.

“ LUKIS CHARLESROI DE LOMAGNE.”

This was pinned to a parchment deed, headed in English “ Copy,” and written throughout in legal French, which Robert found some difficulty in deciphering, though the purport of it was patent at a glance. It was witnessed by François Beaupergne, Avocat, and John Tarrant, Solicitor, and signed by Oliver Poole. A note added in English stated the original deed to be in the keeping of Messieurs Beaupergne et Fils of Lyons, and the document set forth the fact that Master Oliver Poole of England relinquished all claim upon his daughter Sylvie Miriam by his deceased wife Cecile Florence Miriam de Lomagne, and gave her to be the adopted child of his wife’s brother, Lukis Charlesroi de Lomagne, and of his wife Matilde Courdrai of Lyons, the infant to take her mother’s name and become sole heiress of her property.

Laying aside letters and deed, Robert took up a second parchment and read it with a deepening sense of tragedy close at hand.

It proved to be the copy of a record of the

marriage at the church of S. Hilaire, Marseilles, between Sylvie Miriam de Lomagne, of Lyons, and Nichol McQueen, of Edinburgh, in Scotland, on October the seventeenth, A.D. 1709. With it was a copy from the baptismal register of the christening of their daughter, Miriam Nicolette, on September twentieth of the following year. Upon a torn fold of paper, which had evidently been wrapped about the package, Robert read a short inscription, written in English by a fresh hand ten years later.

“Toe be keep in safety for my daughter Miriam Nicolette.

“SYLVIE MIRIAM MCQUEEN.”

The cat finished her toilet, rose from her precarious seat, wriggled in through the half-shut window, and rubbed affectionately against Jehu’s unresponsive leg. Slowly Robert re-read the evidence which had shattered his friend’s house of cards, the pitiful truth forcing itself home to his startled understanding. Finally, the tension of the atmosphere becoming unbearable, he forced himself to look at Jehu’s averted face.

“O my God, Poole!” he exclaimed, compassionately.

“You understand,” said Jehu roughly, twisting back his chair and meeting Robert’s pitying gaze with an effort. “The day on which he was murdered Alexander McQueen found some papers among his dead brother’s belongings, which he happened to be examining afresh after

all those years. He would not show them then to my—to Miriam, though he told her that they concerned both her and myself, and that he should show them first to me on his way that evening from Muckleford. When we found him dead on the road his pockets were empty. If the papers were on him (they could not be found at his house) the murderer must have stolen them, and if they were copies of these, or other letters from the same hands, then the murderer may know everything."

He had spoken so far quietly enough. Whatever the man might be enduring it was plain that he had not lost the power of steady thought; rather that all the aspects of his case revealed themselves to him with merciless clearness.

"Poole," said Robert, after a second's swift thought, "tell me. Have you no definite suspicion as to who the murderer may be?"

"I have always believed that King of the Three Crows and Jemmy Heal shot McQueen," replied Jehu, his face lowering as he spoke, "but I have no proof."

"Ah!"

"King is my enemy," continued Jehu, "that is, I suspect him to be so, though for no other reason than that he resents my breaking off from the contraband and trusts no man not to turn King's Evidence. He is capable of any treachery himself, and cunning enough to have suffered my marriage to take place unopposed that he might hold some blackmail over me." He sprang from his seat, kicking the cat aside, and walked

feverishly up and down. "Mr. Purling!" he cried, "Do you understand that I have wed my own niece? What am I to do? How can I go back to her? How can I tell her?" He broke off choking, and stood still.

"You must say nothing yet," answered Robert quickly. "There must not be a word until we have proved beyond a doubt that there is no mistake. I can speak French. I will go to Marseilles and Lyons and search out the records and the firm of Beaupergne."

"What mistake can there be?" said Jehu bitterly. "Are there like to have been two Mademoiselles Sylvies of Lyons? Unless those papers are forged, which is impossible, my father's first wife was Mlle. Cécile de Lomagne and his daughter's child is my wife, Miriam. I would shoot myself but for the harm that King might afterwards do to her."

"I have an interest in the silk industry at Lyons," said Robert slowly. "I could find a business excuse for an immediate journey in the next twenty-four hours if you can manage to accompany me. Could you not find it imperative to return to the farm alone for a short visit? You could then leave Town ostensibly for Dorset and join me instead at Dover. If things are as they seem to be it would then be easier to break it to—her—from a distance by any means that might suggest itself."

He was conscious that he spoke in an oddly commonplace tone, but to Jehu the kindly significance of the thought and suggestion were

plain enough. He could make no immediate reply, and for a moment the full sense of his impending desolation swept down upon him in a flood of misery. He stood with one hand upon the bed-post, his eyes, glazed from shock and sleeplessness, fixed vacantly on the other's face. Robert found himself utterly at a loss for further words. The cheeping of sparrows seemed to grow louder and louder until it filled the room.

"I must go back now," said Jehu at last. "Miriam will wake and wonder where I am. I will think. It might be needful to go down to the farm to alter the terms of the agreement with Elihu; it has to be renewed shortly."

"That is a good fellow!" said Robert, relieved. "Go back now, and after you have breakfasted join me at the Chapter. We will stay there long enough for a messenger to seek me with letters at this house and to follow me on there, which will lend colour to my tale of a sudden call abroad. You can then return to the inn and tell Mistress Miriam that you have remembered the matter of Elihu Burbage, who, if I remember rightly, is a slippery rogue and better interviewed in person, and desire to catch to-day's coach since there will be no other for a week. I will arrange with good Mme. de Nivers that she shall stay with her in your absence. Madame would be glad of her company. Will that do, Jehu?"

The plan had occurred to him as he spoke. It seemed to fit the case as well as any, and there was plainly no time to be lost. Jehu nodded

speechlessly and turned to go. Then he hesitated.

"Mr. Robert, sir," he said unsteadily, "I cannot thank——"

"No, no!" answered Robert quickly. "It is nothing, nothing."

The door closed, and Purling sat hunched up among the bed-clothes, thinking, realizing.

CHAPTER XII

IN after years Jehu sometimes marvelled, remembering his recollection of mind during the hours which immediately followed upon his early interview with Robert Purling. The one agonizing wave of realization which had engulfed him seemed to recede, and out of the sea of his catastrophe one fact only rose up before him, hard and uncompromising as a rock. At all costs he must save Miriam's good name.

There was very little room for doubt as to King's guilt with regard to McQueen's murder, and therefore as to his possession of the missing papers. By hook or by crook he must get to the truth of the matter, secure the documents and silence their present holder, and that without the help of the Law. King, secretive and calculating by nature, was not likely to have shared the knowledge of his guilt and of the contents of the papers which he had stolen with, at most, more than one confederate; Jem Heal, in all probability, for Jem must have leant him a hand in the Exciseman's dispatch. It was even possible that Jem, who could neither read nor write,

had been kept in ignorance of the documents' significance. There must surely be some way by which a man might find out these things without betraying himself. In the meanwhile he must get away from Miriam.

These thoughts poured rapidly through Jehu's mind before he had gone a hundred paces from Robert's door, and he saw at once that two courses of action lay open to him; either, as Purling had suggested, to go with him to France and satisfy himself personally of the truth of the records, or else to trust that part of the business to Robert alone while returning himself to the farm and concentrating upon the conviction of King and the recovery of the papers. The latter course was undoubtedly the wiser, for otherwise he might waste a couple of months in difficult travel and afford King a good opportunity for developing his system of blackmail.

He no longer attempted to disguise from himself the fact that for some time past he had felt an unreasoning jealousy of Robert Purling, and with the jealousy, despite the confidence which he had just now been obliged to place in him, went a deep-seated distrust of the man.

A hundred tiny incidents had of late convinced him that, had he not returned to England just too late, Robert would have reappeared at Dorchester as Miriam's suitor, and a successful one at that. Had not Miriam herself told him plainly that her present warm affection for him had only been born on the day of their betrothal? He had not the smallest doubt of her entire faithfulness,

nor of the truth of his belief that he had succeeded in winning from her a truer love than ever Purling, in spite of his attractiveness, could have aroused: but there had been moments when, peering into his wife's eyes, Jehu had read in them both love and regret; love deep, tender and triumphant, but not the first eager passion of a whole heart such as he for his part had given to her. A few days in Robert's company had sufficed to reveal to him the truth of his surmise, but, with that, also the further truth of Miriam's perfect integrity and of her unmistakable disillusionment with regard to his rival's actual worth. Watching her covertly he had read and rightly interpreted the hint of scorn which had sometimes passed over her expression at one of Robert's delicate innuendoes or more evidently studied efforts after effect. Jehu, loyally grateful for the warmth of her devotion, had sternly held his impulsive jealousy in check, even when the man's subtle charm had made him gallingly aware of his own lack of educational polish. Steadily, patiently, he had built up the house of their mutual confidence, brick by brick, labouring to make the marriage which, it now seemed, had never legally existed, into an eternal reality, building into it all the intensity of his religious faith, all the concentrated passion of his nature, all his perception of that vision which now and then stoops through the normal grey of daily skies, to thrill the souls of hungry men. Now, behold, the house was swept away, the skies had closed inexorably, and only the wide sullen sea

of unutterable loneliness remained. Characteristically he faced the prospect with the silent self-control not of the fatalist but of the fighter born. Stripped of all else he stood up instinctively to fight for the one permanent element in his home of dreams; his faith in the immortality of his love. Blood-kin or not in the flesh assuredly in the spirit he and Miriam were indissolubly one. Their brief companionship had been too full of exquisite delight and warm sincerity for any merely human calamity to destroy its essence. Numbly he realized this, and the belief gave him, at any rate for the time being, power to spring from the momentary paralysis of despair into purposeful action.

Dispassionately he weighed the pros and cons of trusting Robert alone in search of the confirmation of the evidence which it would be entirely to Robert's interest to discover. However shocked Purling might be at first it was impossible that this aspect of the case should not dawn upon him; the temptation to give the coup de grâce to the last dying hope of a mistake having been made. Doubtless the mere harbouring of such a suspicion was detestable, but in spite of himself it persisted in buzzing, gnatlike, in Jehu's ear, forcing him seriously to consider it, and its kindred suspicion of Robert's fundamental heartlessness. He decided that Purling must go alone, but must bring back with him letters of confirmation from the firm of Beaupergne and the Curé of S. Hilaire at Marseilles.

Having arranged this point he turned rapidly

to the next, the problem of his score with King and the manner of its settlement. Clearly he must return home alone without a moment's delay. Once there and assured of King's guilt it would be strange indeed if he could not devise some method of forcing the blackmailer to betray himself and give up the papers. If the worst came to the worst, why the fellow was a cold-blooded murderer and he would have no scruple in killing him with his own hands. Afterwards, when Miriam's safety was secured, only one further solution of the puzzle of his life appeared to remain. Miriam must never mourn him as a faithless husband, nor must her life be darkened by a knowledge of the truth, and there were many ways by which a man might meet with death without a suspicion of suicide. There was no need, he thought with grim humour, to make his grave at the cross-roads with a stake through his heart.

Miriam, to his great relief, was still asleep when he reached the Rainbow. He changed his clothes, washed and brushed away as much as possible of the traces of his all-night vigil, and packed his valise in silent haste. Then, nerving himself to play his part successfully, he drew back the bed-curtains to rouse her.

She was already waking, and sat up in bed with an exclamation of sleepy amazement at the sight of his white tired face.

“Whatever is the time, Jehu?” she asked.
“Why, ye've never been to bed at all! There's

your pillow smooth as smooth, and ye look tired out. What've ye been doing, ye gurt silly?"

He smiled reassuringly.

"I've been up thinking business, my dear," he said. "I was too wide awake to go to bed, so I have been sizing up my affairs instead, and have found that I should have been back home a week ago as we had planned, until your ladyship fell in love with London. Elihu Burbage's lease of the farm is up, and since it has very much increased in value of late I must make him pay a higher rent. Ye know Elihu. I shall have to see him myself before we shall be able to come to an agreement, and I have been wondering whether, since the Dorchester coach runs late to-day instead of before noon, you would let me go down alone to see to that and other matters? I have been out for a stroll while you slept, and have seen Mr. Robert, who suggests that Madame de Nivers would shelter you until my return. What say you, lassie?"

She rubbed her eyes bewilderedly, pushing back curls and night-cap with an impatient hand.

"I'm yet half-asleep," she said, laughing, "and I dinnot quite understand ye. D'ye mean that ye must go back home for a spell and leave me up here? Could not Lawyer Cane see to th' business for 'ee?"

"Twould mean a dozen or so of lawyers' letters and six months' talk before he got Elihu to the point of agreeing," answered Jehu, smiling, "and I should not care to let the place to anyone

but Elihu, though Mundy has been arter it. There are other things, too, which should be seen to, but we cannot both go home just now without rudeness to our friends up here. You have a dozen engagements to keep, but I can get away more easily."

"How long would ye have t'stay, Jehu?"

"A week or so, not less, I fear."

Miriam studied him intently. Something was evidently weighing on his mind, and she was convinced that neither Elihu nor fifty leases would, without some other and stronger motive for departure, draw him away from the pleasures of his wedding-trip and the fascination of his first publication, now passing swiftly through the press. She went bluntly to the heart of her suspicion.

"Jehu," she said seriously, "'tis excuses you're making; there's some other reason for going back so sudden, and I'm thinking that it may have summat to do with my Uncle McQueen. Are ye going after anybody?"

He seized the opportunity of escape gratefully.

"Miriam," he said, taking her hand and caressing it gently, "there's no need for me to tell you that I'd be thankful to lay his murderer by the heels, and you must know well that, like most folk round our way, I used once to take a hand in running through the contraband, but I broke off with that when I intended coming to ask your uncle for you, and that was the very night that he was shot. I've had my suspicions all along, but nothing safe enough to act upon

without harming a good many harmless folk, so I have been forced to keep my own counsel. But now I am on the fellow's track; only this morning I hit by accident upon some evidence which may help me to see justice done and the innocent kept safe. I may not tell 'ee more now, but will 'ee trust me as I'd trust you, dear heart?"

She looked up at him questioningly, touching his cheek lightly with her free hand.

"Are ye going into danger, lad?" she asked. "Can I not break these engagements and go down with 'ee? I donnot like your being alone if there's to be trouble for you with any of that smuggling gang. Some on 'em's desperate men, and the Law is so mortal hard on all such crimes alike that they dinnot care what they do; 'tis all one to them what they do hang for."

He sat for the fraction of a second spell-bound, his heart contracting painfully beneath the touch of her fingers. Then he recovered himself.

"I'll be safe enough," he said cheerfully, "and I can act best and quickest alone. Lilian will look after me, and I shall not bide away longer than I can help, depend on that. Our sudden return home together would be too marked, and make my task more difficult, whereas if I give out that I am only up to see to some business before continuing a long visit to London I am free to come and go without the whole countryside knowing of it."

She eyed him doubtfully, suspicious of she knew not what, though confident of his good

faith. Then, anxious to show him her confidence, she gave way.

"You know best, lad," she said reluctantly, "and I'll do as ye want, but are ye sure that I cannot help?"

"Ye can help me best by biding here," he answered. "You're a good woman, my dear, and a true help-mate for any man, for ye know well how to hearten him on without a mort of fuss. It takes men-folk to deal with men, and now I'm clearing the decks for action and petticoats are better out of the way. But my skin's safe enough, if it's that which troubles 'ee."

"Times 'tis a worry being a woman," said Miriam, "but I'll copy Patient Grizel since ye want me to, so I'd best be getting up."

"Good. Then I'll be going along. I must see Murth and call upon Mme. de Nivers. If you will breakfast and pack I will come back presently with a coach."

He turned to the door, but she recalled him reproachfully, with a cry of "Jehu, ye havena kissed me!" and he returned, with a sick heartsinking, to meet the warm touch of her lips. Then, smiling, he left her, passing blindly out once more, and exchanging "good-mornings" by the way with half-a-dozen of the inn's occupants.

The Chapter Coffee-house was almost empty, but Robert was walking up and down the street before it, and the two men shook hands silently. Robert led the way to a quiet seat and began the conversation.

"I have seen our friends," he said, "and told them that you are suddenly called away to the farm. They are ready to give Mistress Miriam a warm welcome during your absence. You have spoken to her?"

"Yes. She will be ready before noon."

"I have been considering our route," said Robert. "Your best plan would be to leave the Dorchester coach at . . ."

"Your pardon, sir," struck in Jehu, "but I believe that it would be a better plan if I go home first in reality, get to grips with King, settle up my affairs, and then, if all's well, go on to Cherbourg from Weymouth and await you there. If you make your return journey by that way you could bring me there letters from the French lawyers and the priest of S. Hilaire, if the records are correct, and in that case I should not return to England at all, but can leave Miriam in peace if I have silenced King."

Robert drummed his fingers on the back of his chair, watching Jehu's face thoughtfully.

"Poole!" he said sharply, "what exactly do you mean by that word 'leave'?"

Jehu met his gaze unwaveringly.

"What would you mean by it in my place?" he asked. "Would you have Miriam either believe herself cruelly deserted or know the truth?"

Robert's answering gaze dropped, and he sat very still.

"Jehu," he said at length, "you are a braver man than myself. Let me suggest to you a better

road than that. I shall feel myself to be a murderer if you force me to stand aside and suffer you to go that way, but I can give you an introduction to a merchant in the Barbadoes under another name, and you could go out there after contriving an apparent . . . death . . . in France."

Jehu made no immediate response, for at that moment a lad entered the coffee-room and at a waiter's direction crossed over to their corner.

"Mr. Robert Purling, sir?" he asked, touching Robert deferentially. "The coachman on the Dover coach gave me this letter to carry to you, and bid me give it into your hand myself. They sent me on here from your house, sir."

"That is right, my good fellow," said Robert, producing a coin. "Ah! this is from Lyons. You need not wait." He paid and dispatched the messenger and broke the seal, a second later uttering an exclamation of well-feigned annoyance.

"I must leave England for France to-morrow, Poole," he said loudly. "What an infernal nuisance!"

"What! Are you off to France again so soon, Mr. Purling?" asked an elderly customer just seating himself at the next table.

"I fear so," answered Robert, turning towards him. "I am partner in a firm of Lyons silk-weavers, and this letter calls me over at once on business. I must go and see my uncle, Poole; will you come with me?"

They made their exit swiftly and turned their steps in the direction of S. James' Street.

"I forged that letter carefully," said Robert, when they had walked awhile in silence. "I wrote it in French and gave it to a seedy fellow whom I know to hand for deliverance to me to the driver of the Dover coach when it came in this morning. The coachman knows me well and where I am to be found, and I knew that he would give it to one of his own messengers, which will lend colour to my tale."

"That was well thought," replied Jehu, absently.

Robert Purling senior received them graciously, with many exclamations at this second hasty summons from Town. He regarded the French epistle with inquisitive eyes, but, being quite ignorant of the language, had to content himself with his nephew's translation of its purport.

From him they hastened to Pall Mall, where Monsieur de Nivers, having been taken to pieces by his valet overnight and not yet being successfully put together again, remained invisible, and they were interviewed by Madame. The little lady, stouter than usual in a frilled muslin wrapper, but as fresh and upright as though sixty-odd years and a late ball weighed nothing upon her shoulders, greeted Jehu with voluble sympathy.

"I shall be delight altogether to shelter your wife, monsieur," she said, closing a plump hand about his. "But what a pity that you must leave her so soon after you arrive in town! Return quickly."

"My business in Dorset is urgent, madame," said Jehu, "or I should not go. I thank you heartily for your hospitality."

She eyed him penetratingly, her black eyes hardening.

"Ah, monsieur, were I you, with madame to wife, no business should take me from her. I should be infatuate! Your pardon that I am bold."

A dull flush mounted to the roots of his hair and he withdrew his hand sharply.

"It is to do her a great service that I go, madame," he said stiffly.

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled an apology.

"True, monsieur," she replied. "You know the best your business."

Miriam, with the aid of a chamber-maid, had finished her hurried packing when Jehu returned to her with the hackney-coach. Her personal property had swelled amazingly during their sojourn at the Rainbow, and a number of parcels and band-boxes had to be bestowed in and on the lumbering vehicle. As a result they found on reaching Pall Mall that they had run the time rather fine, and Jehu was thankful for the unavoidable haste of his farewells. He left Madame buzzing happily about her friend, and carried away with him a haunting memory of Miriam's face, half wistful, half amused, smiling at him beside a restless figure in pink. He caught the coach by a hair's breadth and was fortunate in securing a seat. An hour later the

horses were trotting merrily through a sunny country, and he sat staring blankly at the familiar landmarks of their road and trying to force in upon his dulled perception the fact that he had probably looked on Miriam's face for the last time.

CHAPTER XIII

ELIHU BURBAGE sat in his garden, smoking contentedly and admiring his early roses and well-set young fruit-trees.

Elihu's house stood upon the opposite side of the road to his tannery, some five hundred yards above the Three Crows' archway, and the polished brass of its knocker and its snowy array of doorstep shone forth a message of prosperity. He was justly proud of his walled garden, and on this warm May evening of pleasant scents Elihu's soul expanded in silent enjoyment.

He had worked his way up to the possession of house and garden by sheer hard labour joined to a natural business-talent, although the Three R's were still subjects of difficulty to him, and he could calculate better in his head than upon paper. Having attained to the position of Mayor of Muckleford his ambition was satisfied, and in the opinion of Elihu Burbage there were very few things which really mattered in the universe about which Elihu Burbage did not know.

The only fly in the ointment of his peace of

mind was Stephen King, for in the days when Elihu was working his way upward and the tannery was becoming well-known about the county, Jehu Poole's farm was put up to let, with as fine a flock of Southdowns for sale as any in the country, and the tanner had set his heart on becoming both tenant and purchaser.

The price of the sheep, however, was at that time far beyond his means, but he had helped largely in the running of brandy for the cellars of the Crows, and knew King to be a man of means. To him he applied for a loan of ready money, which he received at the rate of six per cent. and a mortgage on the tannery.

Now even in the smallest of cities a man is not likely to climb to the mayoralty without paying for the honour by the way, and Elihu's wife, whom he took to himself late in life, was young, pretty, and blessed with a strong idea of her own importance. The Tannery and the farm alike prospered, for Elihu knew how to choose and how to work his men, so that there was no shortage of money in the twinklingly trim little house; but the mortgage remained unlifted to cloud the tanner's horizon.

It clouded it slightly to-day, and Burbage, enveloped in a hazy atmosphere of tobacco smoke, meditated by degrees upon possible economies, until the garden gate clicked and he beheld Jehu Poole striding towards him along the grass path. Elihu rose surprisedly.

“Evenin', Jehu!” he said. “I thowt ye were stayin' on up in Lunnon.”

"I'm back for a week or so on business, Elihu," replied Jehu, shaking hands with him. "We are prolonging the trip but I am obliged to see to a thing or two up here, so I came back by yesterday's coach. I want to settle with 'ee about the lease of the farm."

"Zit 'ee down and have a poipe," said Burbage, making room for his visitor on the rustic seat. "Kath'rin!" he bellowed in the direction of the house. "Bring on oot two poipes and zome ale."

"Not for me," interrupted Jehu hastily. "I'm pressed for time this evening and must be getting along. Do 'ee want to renew the lease, Elihu? I'll be seeing Lawyer Cane to-morrow in Dorchester and can ask him then to draw up the new agreement, for I'm wanting a bit more rent."

"Well, now! What do 'ee want more rent vor? 'Tain't no pertic'ler zoize of a vurm."

"'Tis the best sheep-farm in the district, as you well know," said Jehu, "and being an old friend ye've had it dirt cheap so far. 'Tis worth another ten pound, but ye can have it for six. "Does 'ee want it?"

"Well, mebbe I do and mebbe I don't," replied the tanner with typical Dorset dislike of speedy self-committal. "It depends. How be the woife? Vit and Vlourishen?" He dug Jehu in the ribs as he spoke and winked largely.

"She's well," answered Jehu shortly, "and bid me carry her remembrance to our friends."

"Be her bidin' with zome of your fine Lunnon acquaintance?" asked Burbage. "I do wonder at yew trusten such a pretty piece up there alone wi' they fine gentry. 'Tis temptin' o' Providence."

"My wife is with friends who will take every care of her comfort," said Jehu shortly. "I'd remind you, Elihu, that I have come to settle up our business as quickly as possible."

"Eh, eh, eh! No offence intended, me lad. Thee do be martal touchy to-day, tew be zure. Have 'ee had words already, t' take I oop zo zharp vor a bit of a joke? Well, there! I'm vorgetting es ye've been wed more'n a quarter and did ought to've recovered vrom the honey-moon es volks do call't, though in my opinion 'tis the most tryin' time in th' whole o' the married state."

"No, no!" said Jehu, struggling with his impatient desire to end the ordeal of Elihu's banter by positive violence. "Your jokes get in the way of business and I'm hurried to-night, as I told you, and wish to have your answer about the lease in order to make arrangements with Cane. If you do not want to renew it Mundy of Dorchester wants to take it up."

"Thet zo? Whatever do Mundy want with a zhip-vurm? Ain't he got enough t' do wi's dairy and arses? Well, I'll tell 'ee what, Jehu. I'll give 'ee another vive pound a year and Lawyer Cane can draa' oop th' lease to once."

"Six pound is the lowest I can take, Elihu, and Mundy would pay the ten gladly. 'Tis six

to you because ye've put stuff into the land and improved it, but you know yourself that it was worth that much more from the beginning, and that it has paid you well all along."

"Tes a ztiffish rise, all the zame, Jehu. Thee must be 'zpectin' a vamily vor zure to be zo zet on six pound."

"No," replied Jehu, so vehemently that the tanner almost jumped in his seat. "Do for the Lord's sake come to the point, Elihu! Ye're as bad as a Jew over a bargain."

"Mattermony ain't improved thee's temper," retorted Burbage, who was enjoying himself immensely. "What's the differ of a pound or two to you?"

"The same as 'tis to yourself," answered Jehu, curbing in the foolish rush of temper which prompted him to wreck a lifelong friendship in a childish quarrel over the old fellow's harmless love of teasing. He was well used to Burbage's ways, which were merely those of a dozen other shrewd self-opinionated good-hearted farmers of the neighbourhood. Elihu smoked silently for a few seconds before replying.

"Thee do be rare and upsy to-night and no mistake!" he said at last. "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried, Elihu, and that's the truth. There's a hundred things to attend to and I want to get 'em done quickly and get . . . away. Will 'ee make up your mind smartly for once, and oblige me?"

"Now es thee've axed I pretty that I will," said Burbage, cleaning out his pipe as he spoke. "Why couldn't 'ee be so polite afore, 'zted o' rushen' at I wi' your zix pounds, like a bull at a gate? I'll renew th' lease on them terms, but another time when things is wrang with 'ee din-not visit them on an old vriend's head. Tak't oot o' the vurst handy offender instead. My advice to 'ee's this: Yew get along back to th' missus and make it oop. Let her have th' last word; 'twon't break no bones, any'ow. There! Vix't oop ye're own way wi' Cane. I'll trust 'ee."

"Thank 'ee. Good-night, then," answered Jehu, rising.

Burbage laid his pipe carefully down on the bench and followed his friend to the gate. He watched Jehu mount Rat-ear and ride swiftly away, then he sauntered back to his seat grinning comprehendingly.

"Theer b'ain't no trusten' of a Frenchie," he mused aloud. "And if 'tes a case of half and half, French and Scotch, theer b'ain't no trusten' of'n neither. Ain't her touched 'n oop voine?"

Jehu rode out of Muckleford by way of the bridge which spanned the river just above the swirling race of water known as Cleaver's Ford. The flood here was deep and treacherous, and took its name from that of a hunted Royalist, who, during the Civil War, had blundered into the river, mistaking the ford in the dark of a moonless night, and, by some special mercy

of Heaven, had struggled through it alive. Normally the place was dangerous enough, but after heavy rains the water rose to the height of the arch of the bridge and thundered by like a mill-race to a small natural rapid. To-day the flood was at medium height, but formidable even so, and capable of exerting a strong attraction to any lover of running water. Jehu reined in, and drew his horse up close to the wall of the bridge as he leant over to watch the flood beneath them.

Water, running water. Would that one day offer him his end? There might be a worse, for in such a current as this a man would never, surely, have time to struggle in the last instinctive fight for life. Here or in some deep French tide he might very easily meet with the accident which would free Miriam from the tragedy of his life, for how could he, at his age, with the first natural buoyancy of youth gone for ever, face the prospect of a fresh beginning in a strange country, without love, hope, or any shred of ambition left to make the intolerable burden of memory bearable? Jaded from his long journey and lack of sleep his whole being cried out for rest, and he pulled himself together with a sharp effort as a movement from Rat-ear reminded him that the beast did not share his present sentiments. He rode on musingly, and on the farther side of the bridge came upon a toddling child trotting along the road to meet its father. Spurring his horse he rode swiftly by the rapturous meeting, crying out in his heart with an inarticulate misery. He

had hoped, dreaming dreams of a fatherhood which should be filled with every good and perfect thing, children whose happy unshadowed comradeship with him should offer him some compensation for his own joyless infancy. He had had no promise yet of the possible fulfilment of that dream, and bitterly he thanked his God for withholding the gift.

Rat-ear slowed his pace at the long gradual rise from the valley to the downs, and half-way home they trotted quietly through a tiny hamlet and Jehu became aware of the fact that they were passing the little church which had seen the benediction of his wedding. God, the farce of it! He recalled the events of that day with startling unwilling clearness; the Marriage Service; the junketting, subdued and simplified from the usual custom because of the bride's recent bereavement, but merry enough, none the less; William Quent's red face as he kissed the bride publicly and declared that he had always hoped to have been in the bridegroom's place, and could only be consoled for the disappointment by reflecting that the next best man had won her; the curious silver seal hanging from Stephen King's fob, and his long secretive face and calculating eyes above it. Ah! . . . Cold blooded devil, how he had contrived to insinuate himself into an invitation to the wedding-feast in such a manner that it was impossible to refuse it without open insult! And the fellow must have known all the time, must have known!

The thought stiffened Jehu's fainting spirit, and as he climbed the hill an incongruous memory of the Sunday after the wedding-day followed him. They had made their first married Communion on that day, he and the girl who was not his wife, and on that day for the first time it had seemed to him that he felt the music of the Liturgy, unspoilt even by the slovenly diction of the pluralist vicar, pouring its marvellous significance into his grateful soul. Ill instructed, and ignorant in a great measure of that spiritual inheritance which later generations were to rediscover and enjoy, Jehu was yet untouched by the irreligion which claimed so many of the Established Church's neglected children. Strangely it had happened that this son of Puritan forebears had fed his isolated spirit upon the writings and meditations of Cosin, Jeremy Taylor, and Ken, and on the day of that Communion it had seemed to him that at last the dry bones of his personal religion had come together, clothed themselves in flesh, and lived. The stern philosophy of old Lilian, which insisted upon the dogma that life was a discipline, and God the God of the scourge, striking and sparing not for man's eternal good, had found its complement in these other teachings, and, like the odour of incense, the newly-grasped meanings of the Liturgy had clung about the folds of his thought during his four brief months of happiness, and returned to him now with unexpected force.

“ The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, Which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto Everlasting Life. . . . ”

“ The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, Which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto Everlasting Life. . . . ”

Then, from the second half of the Prayer of Oblation, “ Here we offer and present unto Thee . . . ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto Thee. . . . ”

He had meant that; meant it at the time with all the force of his nature, realizing in a burst of illumination the love of a God Who in the days of His Flesh had foregone the sweetness of human life that he, Jehu Poole of the Downs Farm, yeoman of Dorsetshire, might drink it to the full both in time and in eternity. The how and why of that stupendous fact no longer perplexed him. As well try to analyse the beauty of living fire. Out of the humility of thankful love Jehu had offered himself indeed. Strange how a man forgot!

He rode on now recalling the line of thought and faith which had made the years of his lonely effort endurable. Suffering was the price of life, for God in the Flesh had not spared even Himself. It was bewildering, but to what else could a man cling when the world fell in beneath his feet? Miriam must suffer, but who could doubt that to her the Eternal Joy opened wide arms of bliss? Should he, the man, seek for a way of escape in sorrow from the vows of his joy, for-

feiting not merely the earthly but the Heavenly union with the woman he could not choose but love?

The distant murmur of the full river floated up to him from the valley, and he rode on, grimly setting himself to face not death but life, for, surely, the Lord loved a valiant man.

Elihu finished his pipe, replenished it, and was beginning to snuff up hungrily the odours of his cooking supper when a second interruption broke in on his peace. The servant-maid Kath'rín appeared in the back porch with the intimation that a strange gentleman had called to see him and was waiting in the front parlour. Scenting a new customer Elihu rubbed the tobacco ash off his waist-coat and went hastily indoors.

Twilight was creeping into the tiny room, and through the half-open door he beheld dimly, as he approached, the slight figure of a man in drab who stood before a case of stuffed birds examining its contents with interest. As Elihu entered the stranger turned about and bowed politely.

“ My name is Mole, Master Burbage,” he said with a London accent, “ and I am recommended to you by my friend Master King of the Three Crows.”

“ Ah, zur! Be'est wanten zome hides?” asked Elihu, returning the bow. “ Not I!” said the visitor, laughing. “ That is, not your hides, sir. No. I'm after a bed, which our mutual friend thinks it better to withhold from me himself. If you can do me the favour of closing that door

securely I will explain. I thought I saw a petticoat outside it just then."

The tanner stepped back to the door, shook his head at a disappearing puff of cambric, and shut the catch firmly.

"Right, zur," he said, returning. "Yew be down on zome o' King's business, I do reckon?"

"That's so," said John Mole. "King has told me that you have now and then lent him a hand in his enterprises and are willing to do him any service in your power." This was as neat a way as he could devise of expressing his knowledge that Elihu was firmly under King's thumb, and Burbage nodded an unwilling assent.

"Then," continued Mole lightly, "you will fully understand that there are reasons for King preferring at present not to acknowledge me as his own personal acquaintance but rather as one of yours who has come up from London in search of you, his old friend, and who naturally made his inquiries after your whereabouts at the Crows, where he has left his horse."

"Why, yez, zur," said Elihu, uneasily.

"Can you put me up for a while?" asked Mole. "I have business to see to in the neighbourhood, and King suggests that you bring me back to the Crows to-night and introduce me to the company as your friend. My Christian name, by the way, is John." He smiled amiably at his reluctant host.

"Lor!" said Elihu irritably. "King do be a one vor vixen oop volk, to be zure! Look a here,

zur. Be I putten' my head int' trouble wi' th' excoise over this here plan, because I've took all the risk es I do care about already, and I be the mayor o' this city."

"I assure you that you will be quite safe on that count," replied Mole, amusedly. "You need not be in the least nervous, and your good lady need not put herself about at all for my entertainment. My tastes are very simple, and I will give you as little trouble as possible."

"Very well, zur," said Elihu, with resignation to the inevitable, although he could not gather much real assurance from the stranger's protestation. "I'll go and speak to my wife."

"It will not be needful to take her into our confidence, I believe," said Mole, checking him. "I hear that you have not long been married, and that Mistress Burbage is not like to know of all your early friends before you came to this part of the county."

"That's true," answered Burbage. "No, I'll not tell her nowt. I'll just tell her es ye're bidin' wi's and that you'm an old long-lost friend o' mine es went oop t' Lunnon, and ask her t' hurry along wi' th' zooper and get 'ee a bed ready."

He escaped into the passage, where he stood for a moment to wipe his heated brow before seeking out his wife.

"Dammit!" he muttered vindictively. "Whatever made I zech a vule es t' mix mesel' oop wi' Stephen? There's no knowing what he means by this here. Elizabeth! Dammit! Elizabeth!"

He went to bed that night filled with an intensi-

fying hatred of King and his methods as he recalled his evening of uncomfortable playacting at the Crows and Mr. Mole's flattering attentions to Elizabeth, both during supper and after their return from the inn.

CHAPTER XIV

BRANSCOMBE'S COTTAGE lay in a dip of the downs about a quarter of a mile from the farmhouse, from which it could be reached by either of two routes; the one a footpath rising abruptly over the high pasture behind the house, almost offering the pedestrian a glimpse down the chimney-pots, and the other a narrow lane, little better than a cart-track, sunk between two banks surmounted by low hedges, and turning off the high road close by the rick-yard gate. In wet weather these two roads presented a choice of evils, for the lane was a mere quagmire and the steep path slippery with melted chalk.

Lilian's removal had been planned to take place about a week after Jehu and Miriam should return home. The cottage, built of cob and thatch, was already newly white-washed and set in readiness for Jehu's gift of furniture. The garden at the back, protected from the winds by a high hedge of quickset, had become the daily haunt of Lilian's evenings, for she was an indefatigable gardener, and the prospect of a domain of her own filled her with renewed youth. She

climbed the steep hill-path or toiled along the rutty lane with the vigour of hope, tenderly removing favourite cuttings to their new quarters and afterwards coaxing them into willing growth.

Some four days after Jehu's unexpected re-appearance the weather broke into a heavy thunderstorm, soaking the ground with a deluge of rain.

On the following afternoon, though the sun shone as brightly as before, Lilian decided not to attempt the climb, but to go to the cottage by way of the lane, which she intended entering by walking through the rick-yard and passing out by a small gate, which opened from the orchard several yards above the worst of the mud.

In order to avoid the wet grass she walked cautiously along a track close on the orchard side of the hedge, her small figure entirely hidden from anyone who might be in road or lane beyond, and she had almost reached the gate when someone turned off the high-road, breaking at the same moment into a huskily-whistled rendering of a ballad which had been very popular on the London streets some forty years earlier.

Lilian halted abruptly, set down her basket, peered through the hedge, and awaited the musician's approach, for the air was one which had often haunted her dreams, although she had not actually heard it since the day on which Oliver Poole had brought her away from London to the Downs Farm.

The man came along with aggravating slowness, breaking off his whistling with a curse at

the mud. Abreast of Lilian he paused to rub the dirt off his shoes upon a tuft of grass, then, removing his hat, he wiped his face with a dingy pocket-handkerchief.

So near was he to the little woman that his features were silhouetted against the opposite hedge close on a level with her own. A small sighing breeze, springing up on the instant, covered in its whispering passage the sound of twigs slipping from her grasp and the rustle of her dress as she subsided among the grasses, her face white as paper and both hands clutched over her strangled heart.

For half a minute the man remained where he stood, wiping out the greasy lining of his hat, before he resumed his walk and whistle, the tune floating back to her in a broken diminuendo as his neat drab-coated figure vanished over the dip of the ground above Branscombe's Cottage. Not until then did she stir or allow herself a free breath.

“John Mole!” she whispered faintly, rising to her feet. “God in Heaven! John Mole!”

She stood for a second half-crouched against the hedge, then, like a panicking rabbit, she bolted for home.

Jehu was reaching the close of the most trying afternoon which he had yet spent since his return, when Lilian's knock fell upon his study door. He had set himself to a thorough over-hauling of every shelf and drawer in the sanctum, a task which involved an examination of more than a ten-years' collection of manuscripts, some mere

embryos of ideas, others completed but laid aside as unsatisfactory; for it was needful to leave all in order, and yet in the apparent disorder natural to the affairs of a man meeting with unexpected death. The work served to bring home harshly to his consciousness the fact that shortly he must strip himself even of his name, and pass out of this birthplace of love and dreams to unimaginably new surroundings. There would be no room hereafter for glamour, romance, or tenderness, and he set rigidly to work to sort and thrust aside all that might serve to weaken him in his final ordeal. Even Miriam's pitiful little packet of love-letters, all which she had ever written him, was replaced sternly in its drawer, beside the Will which he had made just after his marriage appointing William Quent and Miriam to be his joint executors. All was in order, and he had just flung a shredded manuscript on the wood fire and tossed his keys into a tray of pens when he heard his cousin knock. With an exclamation of annoyance at this interruption of his peace he crossed the room and unlocked the door.

“Why, woman-alive,” he said sharply, “what do ‘ee want now? I thought you’d gone up to the cottage. What, are you sick?” for she stood supporting herself by the door-post, her breath coming and going in sobbing gasps.

“I’ve rinned . . . top speed . . . vrum Branscombe’s lane,” she replied, stepping inside and sitting down on the nearest chair. “Don’t ‘ee look s’skeered. Bide till my wind do come back to I.”

He stood looking down at her in bewilderment as she gasped for breath, her livid face gradually whitening.

"Run from Branscombe's lane!" he echoed. "Whatever from?"

"Vrum a man es I hadn't a zeed vor nigh on varty year, and did hope never to've zeed again," she answered, recovering her voice. "Bide a bit. Get I a drop of brandy."

He complied, returning with a stiff dose of the spirit, and after a minute or two she came to herself.

"I be a vule, vor zertain," she remarked at length, handing him back the empty glass. "No, the veller didn' zee I. I were t'other zoide th' hedge. Lock thikky door and let's move a bit vurther in. I got zummat t' tell 'ee es I didn' never mean t' tell noone."

She walked to an armchair by the hearth and seated herself, crouching forward with her hands in her apron and her feet on a large hassock. So enthroned she looked like some fireside elf, all white cap, pointed chin, and glowing eyes in which fear was rapidly giving place to a pin-point flame of anger. Jehu stood before her, filled with a confused sense of apprehension.

"Jehu," she said peremptorily, "zit 'ee down. Thee's too martal big to be talked t' ztandin'. Thet's right! Now draa' thee chair up closer so's I can hold thee hand and ax 'ee a question. Hev I been a good kind of a mother to 'ee, thet is, in 's vur es a body like I could a bin?"

"The best in the world," he said warmly.
"What's thee driving at?"

"Ef thee knowed es I deserved a good hanging, Jehu, would 'ee give I to the hangman?"

"Not if thee deserved fifty hangings, good or bad," he said, half-laughing. "Whatever do 'ee mean?"

"I mean," answered Lilian very grimly, "thet avore thee veyther vetch'd I here I were a thief and a varger, and thet man es I zeed just now could get I hanged vor zure ef 'n chose."

"Lilian!"

"Tez true. Just 'ee listen, Jehu, and I'll tell 'ee. Thee minds what a terror thee veyther could be when he had a mind to 't? Well, my husband Dan'l Poole, thee veyther's vurst cousin, were own cousin to the Devil hissel', and whatever he did take a hand in I were varced to have a share on't. I were Darset barn and bred; my volks comed vrum Zwanage way; but my mother her died when I were a gal and veyther he vell in wi' bad company and took I up wi'n to Lunnon. He were caught thieven' and hanged and I were left alone at zixteen es lost es a sparrer at zea. One o' veyther's vriends es I didn' know much about axed I to marry'n, and we were married by a Fleet parson, and he took I home to's old mother, and between 'em they purty nigh broke I to pieces avore the year were out."

She paused, her face suffused with angry memory.

"I were a clever gal," she continued, her hold on Jehu's hand tightening as she spoke. "I'm no

s' ztupid now, and I were allus quick-eyed and quick-vingered, which were why Dan'l married I. He were a law-copyist, and taught I to read and write, and arter a while to do zome of the copyin'. I liked that work, though I didn' understand half of what it were all about. I learnt to copy any zart o' hand-writing that he did zet I to do, and to do't purty quick too, for all I were zo dulled and ztupid wi' th' year o' they two. Zimmed es ef all my wits 'd gone int' me vingers, them days, till I were better at's own job then himself'.

" Next house to us there were a widow-man named Mole wi' one son. He were a gentleman o' zarts, a bookish zart o' veller, zly es zly, wi' a bit o' money. Him and Dan'l were thick wi' each other, and he used t' tell's that he'd onces been tutor to a nobleman's son. However that may a bin he weren't zo zlim es Dan'l, and one day Dan'l comes to I wi' a parchment in's hand.

" You copy these here names on to this here paper, down here at th' voot on't," he sez, putten'-n down afore I and coveren' oop th' top half, and given' I a torn bit o' parchmenty paper wi' Mole's name writ on't along o' two others.

" I had a purty clear idee that he weren't up to no good, hiden' the writen' vrum I like that, but I'd the year o' hell of'n, zo I didn' ax no questions but just did es I were bid. He waits beside I till I'd done, and then he takes the thing away and I didn' think no more about'n."

She stopped and suddenly withdrew her hand.

" Next day," she continued rapidly, " Mr.

Mole comed in and had zupper wi's, and a while arter that he zaid es he didn' veel hissel' and went back home to bed. Come twelve o'clock that night John Mole ran round to call up Dan'l's mother, and zaid es his veyther were dead. Us all went round to'n, and her and Dan'l went upstairs while I bided below wi' th' servant lass es were vritten. Presently John comes back int' th' room and zends the lass out.

“ ‘Mrs. Lilian,’ he zez, ‘ I do believe es thee man have had a hand in zenden’ my veyther off zo quick, vor here’s his Will es I’ve vound lyin’ out on’s table where I do know he never’d a left’n, and ‘tain’t nothen’ like the one es he did zhew I only two days ago, though ’tez witnessed by the zame volks. ’Tez all in thee’s man’s vavour, and I dare zwear es these here zignatures b’ain’t trew.’ He looked at I wi’s little pale eyes, and I couldn’ zay a word. ’Twere like’n to be poken’ about among’s veyther’s things afore the carpe were cold. I zet theer ztaren’ at ’n like a ninny.

“ ‘Thee be rare’n clever wi’ them vingers o’ thine,’ he goes on, ‘ but one o’ these days they’ll tie up a knot es thee can’t undo,’ and wi’ that he goes upstairs.

“ I were that veared, Jehu, that I couldn’ think nor move until I heared Dan'l comen’ downstair, and then I upped and ran out th’ house int’ th’ dark. I did it zo zudden that I got clean away, and went down int’ Alsatia to an old thief es’d once done I a good turn. Her hid I oop in her back attic and kept I vor a vartnight, and then one day her comes to I and her zez ‘ Don’t ‘ee be

veared no longer, Lilian. There's the small-pox down thee's street. Old Mole must a bin zickenen' vor't when thee Dan'l gived'n the poison, vor John Mole, he've got it, and thee Dan'l's dead and th' old 'ooman, her's not 'zpected to live. No one don't bother theirsels about 'ee.'

" It turned out to be true. There'd bin a case or two down our way avore but us hadn't paid much attention. The small-pox broke out proper arter that, and John Mole went away es soon es he could. Us didn't hear no more on 'im, and I went to lodge wi' a zemstress in Ram Alley es did needlework vor a dress-maker and got I work too. I began t' veel more like liven' then, and one day I were zent to take zome zewen' to an old customer o' the 'ooman's, a bookseller's wife in the Strand named Murth, and I zeez there a gurt up-standen' veller wi' a look o' Dan'l about 'n es vair turned I zick.

" Mrs. Murth, her zez to'n, ' Here, Maister Poole; you'm looken' to vind out zome of your veyther's volk, and here be a 'ooman-body o' your name. Mebbe her'm one on 'em.'

" Well, 'twere thee veyther, Jehu, and he axed I a question or two and I did zee es he weren't quite a zecond Dan'l. I zatisvied 'n es to meself and he took I to's wife; he were just married then; and arterwards they brought I down here, and here I've abin ever zence, thinken es I were zafe till I zeed John Mole just now. Theer weren't no mistaken' of 'n, though he be more'n fifty-vive by now, I'm thinken'."

She had told her tale with a cold suppressed fury of manner which gradually changed to anxiety as she watched the varying expressions pass across her foster-son's face. There was that in them and in the broken exclamation which the mention of Mole's name called forth which puzzled her. At the end of her history he sprang to his feet, his face working with excitement.

"Lilian!" he cried, "I know this John Mole! I used to see him constantly about the Rainbow, and if he has followed me down here that throws light on many things. Perhaps he is in King's pay. If so he must have known for some time that you were living here, and have had orders to wait until they could use you as a tool against me. Or it may only have been my name and the likeness to my father's people that struck him when we were doing business and made him watch me and follow, thinking to find you out. I wish I knew, I wish I knew!"

Lilian sat looking at him in bewilderment. She had schooled herself to meet incredulity, dismay, anything but this amazing self-absorption, this dragging of Jehu's private affairs into her own. He walked to the window and returned without looking out.

"Your pardon, Cousin Lilian," he said, catching sight of her expression. "You think me mad, but it seems that you and I are in the hands of the same folk, as like as not. Don't you be afraid; by the time I've settled with them they'll be more concerned for the safety of their own necks than for stretching ours. We're both out-

casts in a sense, and are going to sink or swim together."

"What do'ee mean?"

"I'll tell 'ee. We must join hands over this, and you've been all the mother I ever knew, and Miriam'll need you when I'm gone," he said, half musingly.

"Gone!" She twisted round in the great chair to stare at him.

"Ay, that's it. I'll tell 'ee, mother, but for pity's sake dinnot look at me!" The cry broke from him involuntarily, and he turned for refuge from her startled face to the familiar litter of his writing-table. Sitting beside it he told her in brief bald words the history of the past week, and at the end of it waited, rigid and silent, for the expected outburst. It came in one bitter cry of "Jehu, my lad!"

"'Tis true, mother," he said more gently, as she came towards him. "Cleaver's Ford would probably have had me the other day but for your teaching. I have lost too much in this life to dare to risk any hope of the hereafter, but the fact remains that I must die to Miriam and set her free. Mr. Robert will give me a letter to a merchant in Barbadoes, and when the scores are settled here in England and all is safe for her good name, I must leave the country and take what comes."

"No, no, no!" Lilian's voice rose in her dismay. "Zettle with the devils, but dinnot go away! Who's to know the truth? God let 'ee marry her, she'm your wife to all the world, and

'tis His fault ef 'tez a crime. I willna zee my lad's life ruined and be left alone in my old age for all the marriage lines and christenens in the world! . 'Tez monstrous. . . ."

"Be quiet!" Jehu's hand closed on her thin arm, then he released it gently and crushed the frail shaking body to his breast. She caught her breath and stood trembling and panting in his arms, all her usual self-repression broken down.

"Jehu," she said at last, speaking rapidly, "I did think that ef I zarved thee mother and veyther vaithvul God'd vorgive I. I didn' never think to love no one ever again, but I did come to love 'ee dear when thee mother died and I had 'ee vor my own, and had to keep 'ee vrom beatens and the like. Thee's every martal thing es I have. What's any 'ooman bezide 'ee? Ef thee goes, take I with 'ee, take I along to Barbadoes!"

"Lilian, mother, come to thee senses! D'ye not understand? Miriam is my own niece, my father's grand-daughter, my half-sister's child. I must leave her, and you must remain to tend her. There is no other way for you to serve me."

She stood fighting hard against the pent-up passion of nearly forty years, and he waited, afraid by word or touch to break through her reserve of strength. Suddenly she drew back from him.

"I be a wicked vule," she said bitterly. "I be a zinner vighten' agin' th' rod vor a vew end years o' life es ef they was the youth I never did have. Do es 'ee will. I'll not raise a vinger to zend nor ztay 'ee, but I'll vight King and Mole and all

on 'em vor 'ee. Give I zummat t' vight, and I'll vight'n and hang vor'n ef need be. 'Tez all one to I arter this, but 'tez thee es I do grieve over."

"Time enough for grief after the fighting," replied Jehu grimly. "Lilian, some day I'll tell 'ee all that I feel for thee, but I cannot do it now. Put it by for a bit and help me, mother."

They sat long in the darkening room.

CHAPTER XV

JEMMY HEAL was busily engaged at six o'clock in the morning in cleaning out the bar.

The day, despite the season, happened to be chilly, and the room, with its trampled floor, tobacco ash and dirty mugs, showed cheerless in the dull light, while Jemmy swept the soiled sand out of the door and sprinkled fresh with gloomy deliberation.

His face, as usual, was inexpressive, but any-one used to Jem's slight variations of countenance might have detected that all was not well with him this morning. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder at the parlour door whose glazed top gave upon the bar, and each time he did so with a lowering brow and a mut-tered syllable, as though he expected an interrup-tion to his work and was inclined to resent it when it came.

Jemmy was, in truth, troubled about many matters. To begin with, he had recently had words with his master for almost the first time during his twenty years of service, and for quite the first time he had come to distrust King's

nerve and discretion. Hitherto he had commonly followed the inn-keeper's lead without question, his coolness and calculated daring having won Jemmy's whole-hearted admiration, but of late King had shown an irritability of temper and other signs of nervousness which inclined his tapster to the belief that his master was breaking up, and Jemmy Heal held the opinion that it was better to retire from the trade at once than to continue running needless risk on a failing courage. The advent of John Mole upon the scene troubled him exceedingly.

Mole's name had long been familiar to Heal as that of one of Stephen's chief agents in London, who saw to the disposal of such lace and silk as King succeeded in running safely through. Until recently he had never met him in the flesh, and he did not now find him prepossessing. Jemmy took great exception to the agent's uncomfortable habit of appearing suddenly and silently from nowhere, always with an air of amused secrecy, as though he had detected somebody in the act of talking too freely. Jemmy, though proudly conscious of his own capacity for silence, found these interruptions to his occupations to be trying to the temper, conveying as they did a sensation of continual supervision which he resented hotly. Moreover King plainly had made Mole his confidant in matters best kept to himself and his henchman, a fact which made Jemmy both nervous and jealous. After Burbage and his reputed friend had left the Crows overnight and the bar had been safely closed, Heal

had gathered himself to the attack, and had boldly charged his master with having given them both away to a slinking cur, and the immediate result had been a surprising outburst of rage on the part of Stephen, culminating in the announcement that Mole knew the nature of the contents of McQueen's papers, which King had never seen fit to impart to Jemmy, and that if he so distrusted his master's discretion he had better cut himself free and depart forthwith.

The quarrel was soon over, for Jemmy, whatever his faults, was loyal, and prepared to pay the price of his master's folly if necessary. He remained, however, unconvinced by Stephen's assertion that he had not employed Mole for the past five years without a useful knowledge of the man's way of living, which would make it impossible for him to betray them without betraying himself into the bargain. Jemmy retired into his shell and held his peace reluctantly.

He was beginning to consider McQueen's death to have been a great blunder, although it was difficult to see how otherwise he, King, and others could have escaped the clutches of the law, and the affair had been very deftly handled. Their joint dealings had more than once led to manslaughter but never until then to murder direct, and the memory of that bit of business was an ugly one. Jemmy was not an imaginative man, but there were nights now and then on which he would wake up to the darkness in a cold sweat from the dreaming recollection of a certain moonlight ride along a short-cut from the back of the

inn to the downs with a dead man for company. The reality had been bad enough, his steady cob jogging nervously along beside the exciseman's frightened horse, to the saddle of which he and King had strapped McQueen's body in the attitude of a man helplessly drunk; but the dream-version of the event was always marked by the sound of pursuing hoof-beats, and always, just as they gained upon him, the body would slip from its moorings and trail hopelessly along the ground. Jemmy would thereupon wake up with his heart in his mouth and his hands clutching the sheets with a clammy grasp.

Although his glance wandered so often to the parlour door Jemmy's reason told him that Mole was hardly likely to put in an appearance at that hour nor from that direction. As a matter of fact John was at that moment just awake, and luxuriating in the comfort of Elihu Burbage's best bed, as he lay arranging in his mind the line of campaign for the day.

He congratulated himself heartily on his power of keeping his own counsel. Ostensibly he was here to hand over personally to King the forged letters and to arrange one or two trifling matters of business at the same time, King being profoundly unaware of the fact that his agent had any personal axe to grind or any individual quarrel with the family of Poole. Mole himself had only learnt of old Lilian's existence in this quiet corner of the country since the time of the inquest on the murdered McQueen, and he felt

no little satisfaction at the possibility of killing two birds with one stone, by forwarding King's blackmail upon Jehu while levelling a similar action upon his housekeeper for his own benefit. Apart from any money-profit which might accrue to him he would derive a good deal of pleasure from baiting the old lady, for Mole, in his secret profession of social mercenary, had served many masters and been obliged to endure a goodly amount of baiting himself, which he was ready and willing to pass on to any other sufficiently helpless victim. Lilian, judging by his former remembrance of her, was an ideal subject, and, moreover, knew nothing about him which could afford her any weapon for a counter-attack. He could begin to move in his own private business once he was certain that King had succeeded in getting his thumb firmly on Poole and his wife.

It was now plain that the papers which he had so cleverly concealed in the lid of Mrs. Miriam's trunk had been found; whether by Miriam herself or by Jehu remained to be seen, as, also, supposing Jehu to have made the discovery, whether he had shared the knowledge with her. The probabilities were in favour of the lady being the discoverer, in which case she must have informed her husband, which accounted for his hasty flight from Town. The situation appealed to John Mole, and he blessed the coincidence which had in former days made him familiar with the secrets of just such another ancient wedding-chest as Miriam's.

Meanwhile King had been playing most amazingly into his hands, and a scheme whereby he might extort a species of blackmail from the blackmailer was simmering pleasantly at the back of Mole's mind.

He had no affection for his present employer such as had claimed Jemmy Heal's loyalty; indeed he had slight reason for feeling any such emotion, for King had proved to be a dangerous man to deal with and had tempted him into deeper waters than were comfortable even to an expert swimmer like himself. Mole had been long enough at his mercy to seize eagerly at any chance of gaining the upper hand, and, fresh from the news of London, he held a brand new trump card in the form of the knowledge of the recent passage of the latest Smuggling Act. The Act, which had formed a centre for heated debate, offered a free pardon to all offenders against the Laws of Excise up to date, while increasing the pains and penalties for future offence, together with the reward payable by the Crown for the apprehension of a smuggler. Its provisions cleared Mole from most of the danger of his past transactions, and at present he was not assisting in any contraband business, whereas King, as he knew, was expecting daily news of a large consignment of foreign spirits which were to be run under the very nose of the Excise to the shelter of a hidden cellar beneath the inn. True, if King were to be betrayed he was as likely as not to denounce his betrayer as a forger, having

nothing then to gain by keeping silence even with regard to his own iniquities; but it might conceivably be possible to frighten him into leaving the country before long, for the new Act could not cover the charge of McQueen's murder. Meanwhile Mole decided to mark time and await his chance of revenge.

He lay awhile in warm idleness, listening to the sounds of Elihu's ablutions in the next room, then rose tranquilly and began to dress. Presently he heard Mrs. Burbage's skirts rustle along the passage, and a while later, her voice, raised in song as she helped to prepare the breakfast, floated cheerfully up to him as he shaved. He smiled indulgently. They were good folk, this country couple, and Elihu would be greatly relieved by the Smuggling Act.

The day was rapidly improving, and by the time breakfast was eaten and Elihu had gone across to his tannery the sun decided to show himself. Mole smoked a comfortable pipe in the dewy garden, picked himself a sentimental buttonhole of *Lads' Love*, kissed the giggling *Kath'rin* as she came out of the house to gather vegetables for her mistress, and finally sauntered down the street to the *Crows*, being, at the moment, almost the only idle man in Muckleford.

His leisurely progress was checked by the sound of a horse and cart coming down the hill behind him at a hand-gallop. He dived quickly into a doorway, watched Jehu flash past him at his old reckless pace, and wondered for a moment

whether the man was deliberately courting a broken neck.

Rat-ear, however, was well used to the game, and swung in safely under the archway of the Crows, avoiding a collision with a straw cart apparently by the special intervention of Providence. His driver pulled up before the bar door and climbed down, handing over the reins to the ostler.

“ King in? ” he inquired.

“ Ess, zur ; a’ be in th’ bar.”

Jehu pushed open the door and strode in. The place was empty but for Heal, who was arranging lemons on a shelf, and Stephen, who sat behind the bar in his shirt-sleeves making up a ledger.

“ Mornin’, King,” said Jehu.

“ Marnin’. Ain’t zeed ’ee zence I dunno when, Poole,” replied Stephen, closing the ledger and rising.

“ Can I have a word or two with ’ee in the parlour? ” asked Jehu. “ I’ve come on business.”

“ Roight. Ztep along,” answered the inn-keeper. “ What’ll ’ee take? ”

“ Nothing now, thankee,” answered Jehu shortly, closing the parlour door half-way behind him as he entered. “ By the way, afore we talks of other things, is not this yours? ” He opened his coat as he spoke, and drew out of an inner pocket a heavy silver seal hanging from a black silk fob.

“ Why, zo ’tez! ” exclaimed King, holding out

his hand. "I didn' know ez I'd losted 'un. I ain't wored 'n not zence thee weddin'. Where'd 'ee voind 'n?"

Before replying Jehu, who had seated himself near the door, leant back in his chair and shouted over his shoulder for Jemmy Heal.

"Beg y' pardon, King," he said, tilting himself forward again. "But I thought I heard Jem leave the bar, and I wanted to speak to 'n afore I leave. Thank'ee, Jemmy," as that gentleman came in from his lemons. "I've just looked in to restore's fob to King. I wasn't sure that it was his, or I'd 've brought it along sooner. You've seen it before, haven't 'ee?"

"'Ess, vor zure. Where'd 'ee voind 'n?"

Jehu glanced backward into the bar.

"I'm wondering a bit at your owning to 't zo quick, both on ye," he said, slowly replacing the fob in his pocket and buttoning it up safely, "considerin' as I found it on the Dorchester road alongside Mr. McQueen's body eight months ago."

"Ye're lyin'."

Stephen was on his feet, a fleeting but unmistakable shadow of terror passing over his face. Heal stood silent as usual, his cheeks tinged with an ugly yellowish pallor.

"Would I own to th' thing ef I'd reason to veary any zech accusation?" demanded the inn-keeper furiously.

"That's as mebbe," replied Jehu coolly. "Ye said yerself as ye never missed 'n. Ef ye want

another witness ye can have'n, but ye'd best keep quiet. Ye fool! If I'd not had good reason for silence do you think that I'd not have spoken at the inquest? What d'ye take me for?"

"Ye're lyen'," repeated King, more calmly. "I wored thikky zeal at yer weddin'. Ye couldn' a vound 'n along o' th' body, vor I weren't never out on th' Darchester road thik night, were I, Jemmy?"

"No," said Heal, tersely.

"Then 'tis passing strange as I should a found it," replied Jehu. "Best tell I the truth, King. Seems to me that I could hang 'ee if I chose."

"What about ye' sel', then?" asked King, his eyebrows almost vanishing into his hair. "You give I away about it and zee what follers vor ye' sel'."

Too late a movement from Jemmy warned him that the words were as good as an admission of guilt, and he cursed his rattled nerves savagely. A child's trick had been played upon him, and had caught him out unawares, for he could have proved that he had worn his own fob since the date of McQueen's death, and was in fact almost certain that it was still lying in his drawer upstairs and that the one which he had just rashly acknowledged as his was not the same. It had merely served to betray him into the hands of the only man whom he seriously feared.

Jehu rose quietly.

"I've given 'ee warning," he said. "Ye've sent better men than yourself to the scaffold avore

now, Joe Tyler among them. I learnt too late that ye'd played into McQueen's hands to get rid of him, for otherwise ye'd have either been in his place or had to flee the country. Ye tripped ye'self up over that worse'n ever, it happened, so ye had to clear McQueen out of the way too. There's not a man in your business, no, I believe not even Jem here, that ye wouldn't fling to the wolves to save your ugly neck, so I give ye due notice that though my share in your trade is over and done with I'll not suffer ye to lay a finger on any of my friends, and if any of them are sold to the Law, I'll know who the seller is and see that the account is squared."

"Then it'll be tit for tat, Jehu," said King, quietly. "Ef I do zwing, thee'll do worse'n zwing."

"How's that? I run no worse risk than transportation, and you'll not find the Justice here-about who'd give me that," said Jehu, halting on his way out. He was playing his cards desperately and prayed fervently for the power to goad Stephen into showing more of his hand. He had satisfied himself that he had run McQueen's murderer to earth, but it was yet needful to discover whether he held the missing papers and what was their nature.

"Ye're dreamen', Poole," said King, re-seating himself. "Jem, ye can ztand azoide vrum thikky door; Maister Poole can go where he pleases wi's tale o' murder and what-not."

"And suppose that I take it to the Sheriff?"

"Ye dursn't," replied Stephen, with the unmistakable air of a man who holds the trump card.

"I think that ye're mistook, Stephen. The new Smuggling Act is through, with free pardon to all past offenders against the Excise Laws, and double punishment for future offences. I've been quit of the trade for eight months, while you are still in it up to the neck. A word to the Excise and you'm done, for I could turn informer without the least danger to myself from the law."

"Thet ye cannot," answered King, with emphasis.

"How so?"

"Try't and ye'll voind out. Theer's other 'fences agin' the law of this land then zmugglen' or killen'."

"None as I'm guilty of, ye liar!" said Jehu, raising his voice in apparent passion.

"Thet's as mebbe," replied the innkeeper. "We'm quits, you take my word vor't. Es vor thikky vob, tidn' none o' mine, vor I've wored mine many a toime zence McQueen went to sleep."

"'Tis too late in the day to lie about it," said Jehu sharply. "You and Jem both owned to it."

"Well, we was mistook, and anyhow ye've no witness to what we've zaid. 'Twould be your word agin' ourn in a Court o' Law."

"And 'tis well known whose'd be the better believed," said Jehu, carelessly. "Comes to that, however, here's a witness as has heard every word."

The door behind Jemmy opened quietly as he spoke, and Lilian stepped quickly into the room.

"I've a heared," she said, pushing past Heal.

King's pallid cheeks flushed with angry red, and even Jemmy Heal gave vent to a startled grunt. Lilian, who had hovered patiently in the field behind the inn until the sound of flying wheels had given her her signal to enter the yard and watch for the emptying of the bar, fixed her steady gaze upon Stephen's face. Behind her a fifth shadow lingered discreetly before entering.

"Out ye get, ye two blackmailen' devils!" shouted King in uncontrollable fury. "Go wheer ye please and zay what ye please, but ye'll pay vor't Poole, and zo I tells 'ee!"

"What's all this?" asked John Mole, walking softly into the midst of the group. "Hello!"

He pulled up before Lilian, who recoiled violently, clutching Jehu's arm.

"Mistress Lilian!" he said slowly. "After forty years! I always believed that I'd run you down at last, old lady."

"What's this, Lilian?" asked Jehu, freeing his arm with well-feigned amazement.

"If this woman is troubling you, King," said Mole, turning from her to Stephen, "I can prove that she has been a thief and a forger in her time."

"Eh?"

"Come away, Jehu!" She plucked desperately at his sleeve as she spoke. "Come away, and I'll tell 'ee everything! Dinnot listen to thik veller!"

Mole made a movement as though to block her exit, but at a signal from King he paused.

"Thief and varger!" exclaimed King. "What be this ye're tellen' of us, Mr. Mole? Let'n pass. They won't dare hurt us arter this. Do th' Smugglin' Act cover thieven' and vargery in's free pardon, Jehu? I'll zwear not, no more'n it do cover . . . other things es us do know. Yew get along now and zee the Zheriff!"

Jehu opened the door while the innkeeper was speaking, and led out his cousin unmolested. Mole remained where he was, looking accusingly first at the petrified Jemmy and then at King.

"Given us away proper," he remarked at length. "What are you going to do now, sir?"

"Howld me tongue and get even," growled Stephen. "Yew foller my example. What's this about old Mrs. Lilian?"

"That's my business!" replied Mole, tartly. "If you cannot be trusted to keep your head now over your own affairs I'm not inclined to trust you with mine. What's passed between ye? I only came into the bar just as the woman stepped in here."

Stephen recounted the conversation with terse ill-humour, and Mole held his peace for a few seconds, carefully weighing his next words. The time had undoubtedly come for a breakage with his present employer, for King had evidently given himself away, and Poole now held the stronger hand. Poole might, in desperation, be moved, in spite of King's veiled threats, to de-

nounce him, in which case King was more than likely to drag Mole down along with himself, and a forger's fate was no better than a murderer's. He must contrive to make King leave the country at once.

"There's but one bit of advice for a friend to give 'ee, King," he said, at last. "Collect your cash and leave the country as soon as you possibly can. This place is too hot for you to linger in and you've had twenty years' run for your money, anyhow."

"I'll do as I think best."

"Well, I mean what I say. Suppose Poole knows that there are others beside you who know his secret and finds that he cannot keep it safe? He's not a man to go under without dragging you along with him. You or he; one of you has to go, and it had best be you unless you are anxious to lose all the profit of your labours, and 'twould be a fool thing to chuck them away for a mere bit of spite."

"Thet's right, zur," struck in Jemmy Heal, speaking for the first time in fifteen minutes.

"Wash your hands of every trace of McQueen. Give me back the copies which I made for you and the letter that you kept out of the original packet which we passed on," continued Mole, warming to his theme as its full possibilities dawned upon him. "I'll see to the carrying out of the last part of your original plan, seeing that I have a private axe of my own to grind against the Pooles' Family Tree."

"I weren't barn yester'd'y!" exclaimed

Stephen, scornfully. "Ef I clears out I burns them things mysel'."

Mole had not intended to descend to threats except as a last resource, but they were plainly becoming inevitable. He passed swiftly to the point and spoke bluntly.

"Don't run risks, King," he remarked, drily. "There's that consignment of brandy on its way to this house at this very moment, and I have reason to believe that the Excise has smelt it out. That was one matter that brought me down here this morning so early in the day, and caused me to interrupt your little drama of the Blackmailer Blackmailed. If I don't receive those papers intact by seven o'clock to-night I'll inform, which means fifty-pound in my pocket and myself scot free, for I haven't dabbled in your contraband for the last two months, as I can prove."

"Ye dammed sneak-thief!" King was on his feet again, shaking, in a white-hot rage. "I'll have ye hanged vor vargery!"

"Which ye cannot prove," replied Mole, quite unperturbed. "Ye gave me papers to have copied. I sent 'em to a friend whom you do not know and had 'em done. 'Tis no more forgery than making a copy of any other documents, for if you'll call it to mind the registers and deed were headed with the word 'Copy' each time. You'd find it harder to get me safely strung up than to hang yourself, old master. I tell you straight, it will surprise me if you can live on here another twenty-four hours unmolested with both Poole and myself against you, but if you hand

over the papers and quit to-night I'll give 'ee a letter to a friend of mine in France who'll see to you and Jemmy when you're across the water, and after a while there's no reason why the pair of you should not return to another part of England, or possibly Scotland, and continue to make your fortunes. Take it or leave it; 'tis a fair offer and will not be repeated."

"Take it, master!" Jemmy stepped to the innkeeper's side to urge him to acceptance. "We dursn't run no more danger arter this; 'tis too hot vor's altogether."

"That's right, Jem. Persuade him if you can not to hang the pair of you in his zeal for law and order. There's folk coming into the bar, so I'll go out by the passage. We'd better not be seen together again to-day, and I'll wait at the Burbage's. You come out into the ten-acre this evening at six o'clock and give me up the papers safe and sound and I'll give you the letter in return and put you on the way of getting to France, and *into* France when you get there, quick and easy. You've plenty of money, at any rate, so there's no reason why you should not prosper when this little storm has blown over."

"Yew give I away to th' Excise and thee'll zwing along o' I," said King, thickly.

"Do not make too sure of that," retorted Mole. "The ten-acre at six, then. Good morning!"

He walked out through the opposite door into the kitchen regions. Heal surveyed his master in expressive silence, waiting for a specimen of King's vitriolic eloquence, but none was forth-

coming. The innkeeper sat glowering but plunged in thought. Jemmy became restive.

"Let's be moving along, master," he suggested at length.

CHAPTER XVI

JEHU packed Lilian quickly into the cart, and not until the noisy cobbles of the town were left behind did he venture upon speech. When they had begun to climb the long rise to the downs he glanced sideways at her brooding face and spoke.

"Mother," he said tenderly, "thee be the bravest woman in England."

"Be I?" she answered, "Well, I b'ain't aveared zo much vor mysel' es vor thee. I had a hoped to a tackled Mole zome other toime, and him comen' in on's zo zudden-loike did rattle I vor a minute; but thee plaayed oop well, Jehu."

"Why, so did thee. Well, we've learnt what we wanted to know. King's the murderer and he's got those papers, and Mole is plainly hand in glove with him. The question is, Will they stick together, or can Mole be bought, and can we force King to keep silent?"

"He'll howld's tongue vor now," said Lilian. "Thee've got'n int' a carner. He zet oot t' blackmail thee, and thee've turned th' table on 'n. I zeed vrom Mole's vace that he understood

thet, and vrom what I do mind of thet rat he bain't one to bide by a zinken' zhip. Mebbe I can make mesel' int' a bait t' help tempt 'n over, and then, ef he'm in the know about them paapers, he can get 'em out o' King better'n anyone."

"That would only shift us into Mole's hands, Lilian."

"We'm there now, zims to I, and tez better to have only one rogue to tackle then two. Theer's ways vor all things, and I ain't lived among thieves vor nowt."

They drove on in silence for a time before she spoke again.

"'Twas a clear act o' God, Jehu, ez gived I thet old zeal o' Dan'l's. I mid a zold'n long ago, and I dunno what vor I didn'. Lucky thee'd noticed how like it were to King's and thet it zarved thee turn all right. 'Twas a chanct."

"Lilian, I wish that I knew how Mole comes to be in this matter at all."

"I've a bin thinken' about thet es we've coom along. I do mind thet he were getten' to be zo good a penman es mysel' when I zeed'n last in Lunnon, and I've a bin wonderen' whether King's a bin haven' them letters copied."

"What?"

"Tez loikey. Here, ztop th' cart, Jehu; I've got an idee. Let I get down."

He drew up obediently, and she scrambled out.

"Get along to whome, lad," she said from the roadside, "I'm goen' backalong, and I'll coom

along arter 'ee bimeby, but don't 'ee be z'prized
ef it do be laate."

"What's thee going to do?"

"Thee'll hear all about'n when 'tez did. Get
along, and don't hinder of I."

She stepped on to the grass and turned her back on him, and after a second's hesitation he drove on and left her. On the crest of the hill he again stopped, turned about in his seat, and noted her distant progress over the fields. Satisfied that he knew her destination he resumed his way, determining that later on he would return and keep watch for her behind the inn.

After leaving the high-road Lilian made her way across the turf to a footpath leading at a slant over the meadows outside the little town to the ten-acre field behind the Crows. Just before arriving at the Ten-Acre it skirted the bank of the river and ran along beside the Tannery wall, where air and water alike were redolent of hides. Half way along the wall a tarred wooden door led into the yard, and through this she walked boldly, asking Elihu's whereabouts of one of the workmen, who replied that his master had ridden out to a sale of sheep but that Mrs. Burbage was at home. Lilian crossed the street warily and knocked at the door of the house.

Elizabeth herself answered the summons.

"Well I never!" she exclaimed, greeting the visitor with cordial surprise. "Ef it ain't Mrs. Lilian! Why I ain't zeed 'ee not zence th' wedden' day. 'Tez a'most th' vurst toime

thee've coomed in t' Muckleford in the laast voive year, I dew reck'n."

"Thee'm right, Mrs. Burbage," replied Lilian, entering the passage hurriedly, "I b'ain't much of a gad-about and Jehu, he do zee t' me zhoppen' vor I. I coomed in wi'n this marnen' vor a change, and half way back he minded a bit o' business es he did ought t've done wi' thee vriend Mr. Mole. Jehu'm rarely pressed vor toime, zo I zippet out o' cart and zaid es I'd coom backalong and give Mole his message, and ask 'ee t' give I bit and zup and let I bide here a while till th' evenen' when I could walk to whome in th' coolth."

"Thee'm good and welcome," said Mrs. Burbage heartily. "Go on int' th' parlour and I'll call Mole. He'm just coom in this moment and's oot in th' garden."

"Then I'll go oot and zpick to'n," said Lilian. "He'll be zmoken' vor zarten, and's best kep' ootzoide. When I comes back us can have our crack together in peace."

"Thet's roight, then. There a be," said Elizabeth, opening the back door and pointing through the garden up an alley of green fruit-bushes to the seat where Mole sat at his ease. "Get thee business did and I'll get 'ee a drink arter thee walk."

"Thank'ee." Lilian gathered up her skirts, collected her wits, and sailed down boldly upon the enemy's guns.

Mole who had been sitting absorbed in thought, looked up at her approach and beheld the subject

of his cogitations. He had hardly expected her to seek for an interview so soon, but that before long she would search him out he had felt sure, and he greeted her with pleasure. The earlier that he could set his own ball rolling the better, he reasoned.

"Well, mistress," he said, rising from his seat to meet her as she advanced down the alley. "What are you after now? Bribery? Corruption? The hangman?"

"I do be arter a quiet talk with 'ee, John Mole," she replied, "hopen' ez it b'ain't in vain to talk."

"Thee've gone back to thee's old Darset vor zure," he said, mocking her. "'Who'd think that you were ever a Cockney, Lilian, let alone a thief, forger, and mur—'"

"Not that!" she cried sharply. "Thee knows well ez I'd never have had no share in that. Thee knows what Dan'l and's mother did used to do to I. Thee b'ain't goen' t' give I away now, arter all these years, be'st 'ee, John?"

"That depends on yourself, Lilian," he said contemptuously, "I was just considering that point when you turned up here."

"Thee won't do't?" she asked anxiously. "Thee won't give I away to Maister Poole? I've a bin like's mother to'n ever zence her died. Thee've called I thief and varger to 's vace a'ready, and I've had to tell'n a long taale. I couldn' a bear't zo I made'n zet I doon out o' cart and coomed on back to try and zee'ee. I

towld 'n ez thee'd knowed Dan'l and that thee did mind'n to a bin a bad'n, which were why thee spoke zo of I, painten' of us both with the zame brush, ez 'twere. I thinks ez he believes I, vor's never knowed I to be ought but zstraight'n zsquare and he'm martal vond of I."

He scanned her face searchingly, but could read in it nothing but abject dread.

"Why didn't he come along with you?" he inquired.

"I did beg'n not to, and he do trust I zo well that he did let I go," she replied. "John, do'ee take I zomewheres round the garden wheer they cannot zee's vrom the house. I must talk to 'ee private, and Mrs. Burbage, her'll be oot in another minute."

"This way, then," he said, opening a small green gate and leading the way into a tiny paddock where a few apple trees made an attempt at forming an orchard. They walked along in the shade to a quiet corner, where he came to a standstill.

"Well?" he asked coldly.

"What'll 'ee take to leave I in peace?"

"I've no fixed price at this moment, mistress."

"Have 'ee bin and towld King anything about I, John? 'Twouldn' do'n any good, nor thee either, surely."

Again he searched her face for signs of double-dealing, and could find none.

"If Poole's sent you to draw me, Lilian," he said quietly, "he's wasting his time and yours."

"I tells 'ee avore God," she cried excitedly, "ez he ain't done no zech thing! I be coom on my own about my own business. Yew ain't got now't t' do wi' any of hisn, ef thee coomed down these parts arter I, have 'ee?"

"As a matter of fact, old lady, King and I have had a good bit of mutual business for some long while, and so you may tell your master when you return home. However, things seem to move a bit too rapidly to be comfortable with Stephen, so I've given him my notice and John Mole's at a loose end and thinking of retiring from trade altogether and settling down. Still it would give me a good deal of satisfaction to see you pay your debt to me after waiting so long for the payment."

"John, thee couldn't be zo cruel hard-hearted! Look at I. Thee knows zummat o' what I did zuffer at Dan'l's hands. I weren't crook'd avor I merried'n; 'twas him and her ez twisted I so bad. I've bin honest ever zence I did rin away, and thee'll never never have the heart to get I hanged now!"

Mole replaced his churchwarden pipe between his teeth and leant back against an apple-tree smoking thoughtfully. Lilian stood watching him nervously, her hands twisting and untwisting in her apron.

"Life and death," said Mole at last, in a dreamy voice. "Most folk *do* seem to prefer the former, even old uns like yourself, old lady. Even King appears to share the sentiment."

"I'm thinken,'" said Lilian boldly, "thet he has a'most th' best chanct of hangen' of any of's."

"That is what I fear," answered Mole meditatively, "I don't want King to hang, Lilian."

"Been' in the zame boat along of'n," said Lilian softly.

"Eh?" For the third time he scrutinised her, then considered the results of his scrutiny and made up his mind.

"Money's money," he remarked irrelevantly, "but to enjoy it you must have liberty. King's liberty lies well away from Dorset, and so I've just told him. I could do with a few hundreds more before I retire for good from my very interesting researches into other people's family histories, so I'm still open to forming another partnership in safeguarding a valuable bit of information. You can tell your master that, too."

"But what be'est goen' t' do about I?" reiterated Lilian.

"I'm coming to that," he said slowly. "Would you do me a good turn for old sakes' sake, my dear?" He smiled slyly as he spoke, and the little woman winced palpably.

"Will 'ee let I be ef I do do't?" she whispered.

"You listen and you'll hear what your chances depend on," said Mole brutally. "Tell Poole that this fellow King is clearing out, and that if he lets him clear and does not inform on him I'll see that King can do him no harm, neither him

nor his; impress that last on him, Lilian. Tell him that from to-night on I alone hold what he would give all he possesses to lay hold of, and that if he'll give me an interview, and fix for the price that I shall ask him, then he'll be safe for the future and so will you. D'ye understand, old lady? If Poole pays up like a man you go free; if he don't I'll have the law on you. How's that?"

"I'll tell'n," said Lilian, "I'll make'n do't. I can, too, vor I knows what I do know."

"And what's that?"

"Zummat I'm thinken' thet 'ee knows on a'ready. Don't 'ee ax I more."

"Umph! In that case you'll understand the value of the wares I have to sell. Now come on back to the garden, there's Mrs. Burbage calling."

They retraced their steps silently.

Mrs. Burbage was the soul of hospitality. Burbage was not expected home until the evening, and she laid herself out to impress Jehu's housekeeper with the resources at her command. Lilian ate, drank and listened, conscious of Mole's close attention to her demeanour, but she played her part well, sending him furtive glances of appeal at intervals, which seemed to afford him great pleasure. At five o'clock Lilian rose to take her leave, but on Elizabeth remarking that Elihu would be home now at any minute and would drive her back she sat down once more, the fear of Mole's possible escort prevailing over her anxiety to escape from the ordeal

of sitting still in his company. To her intense relief he left them at last at about six o'clock.

"There!" said Elizabeth resentfully when the door had closed safely behind him, "I did hope t've had a nice private crack with 'ee, but thet ztuped veller would ztick indoor and zpoil it all. He ain't got no more zense then Elihu, and thet's not zayen' much. Now I've abin wanten' t' tell 'ee zummat about'n ever zence thee comed." She drew her chair closer to her guest and dropped her voice to a whisper.

"He'm no vriend of Elihu's, whatever they may zay; I knows! I heered'n talken' wi' Elihu the very day he comed zo queerly. He'm one o' King's men, and I guessed vrom th' vurst ez he weren't oop t' no good. My Elihu, he'm zo harmless a good zoul ez did ever live, but thee underzstands what th' contraband do be and the use ez King can maake of't to tie up a poor veller praper. King've got a hold o' zome zart on 'n, but one thing I do know vor zarten, Elihu don't know ez he'm lenden' a hand in harmen' thee Jehu zomeways or other, but I'm purty zure ez Mole and King have got zummat oop their zleevies agin' 'n, though I dunno what it do be. Us be main vond o' Maister Poole, and us don't want'n hurted."

"What maakes 'ee think thet about Mole?" asked Lilian.

"Well, look'ee here, Mrs. Lilian; don't 'ee tell, but I were zo worried wi' thenken' and thenken' ower what I did hear'n zay t' Elihu—I'll tell 'ee what 'twere in a moment—thet I did

taake th' liberty o' looken' round's room this marnen' when he and thee were oot in th' gar-den. All's things were locked oop, but there were a tiddy little notebook lyen on th' ground ahint the dressen' table wheer 't must a velled down off th' edge. Ez 'ee knows I can read zo well ez Elihu, mebbe better, come to thet, zo I just had a peep into'n and what I did zee made I veel justified in keepen' th' little book vor t' hand ower t' Jehu. Zee there?" She slipped a small black book from her pocket into Lilian's hand, opening it midway at the last page which its owner had used. Holding it up to the fading light Lilian read it in trembling eagerness.

" May 25.

" Finished with K. who returns papers to-day. Must apply to J.P. What to ask? Profitable, but must abandon for single payment owing to the circumstances. Afterwards Amsterdam or Utrecht? If P. fails try the wife. ' Requiescat in Pace ' McQueen! "

" 'Twas Mr. McQueen's name ez did catch me eye," explained Mrs. Elizabeth, peeping over her friend's shoulder. " I dinnot understand thikky bit o' French but zeen' his name did maake I think about them initials, and it zims to I ez they do ztand vor ' King ' and ' Jehu Poole ' and thet he must a meant Mrs. Miriam by the wife, and her been' McQueen's niece 'tez plain ez 'tez zummat t' do wi's death ez Mole and

King do know on. Weren't theer zome paapers ez were missen' vrom the body? Looks ez ef them two purty vellers knowed zummat about 'em ef they be them he do write about. I'll tell 'ee what I did think to onct. Us did all know Maister Poole to've run stuff vor King afore he merried McQueen's niece, and us did all believe ez he didn' zay all he mid a zaid at th' inquest because he knowed ez to zpik oop'd harm inner- cent volks like Elihu. I've allus thought ez one of King's gang did zettle McQueen, and thet King hissel' weren't zo innercent ez he did zim. Ef he's got th' paapers wouldn' thet prove zum- mat? Mebbe Mole've vound 'n oot and 's maaken' 'n give 'em oop t' zave hissel' and means t' zell 'em t' Maister Poole, and ef he won't have nowt t' do wi'n to tell on'n to Mrs. Poole. Ef her did think ez her man'd knowed who did kill her uncle and had shielded 'n her might turn agin' 'n, ain't thet zo? Mole mid think ez he could zell King to Maister Poole, and vorce'n to buy vor vear o' losen' his wife. I did haate th' veller vrom th' vurst, but arter I heared'n taalken' t' Elihu thet vurst evenen' I made oop me mind t' voind oot all about'n, and when he made hissel' sweet to I I did plaay oop to'n, the slippery worrm!"

She paused, breathless from her rapid relation of events.

"What did 'ee hear'n zay t' Elihu?" queried Lilian.

"Not s' very much. They heared I comen' along the passage and shut th' door, but I

heared'n zay, 'My name's Mole, and I've bin
zent to 'ee vrom Maister King.' Elihu he zays,
'Do 'ee want zome hides?' and Mole he laughs
and zays, 'No, leastways, not yourn. I be after
a bed ez our vriend do think it wiser to withhold
vrom I. I understand ez thee've done business
vor 'n afore and are willen' to do 'n a good turn.'
Elihu, he zays, 'Yes,' and Mole tells 'n to shut
th' door, zo I had to move on, but I knowed how
much t' believe when Elihu vetched I in vrom
th' kitchen to zee 's old vriend Maister Mole ez
'd coom down all th' way vrom Lunnon t' look
vor'n. Mole, he ztarts off wi' kissen' of I un-
invited on th' ztrength o' been' zech an old
vriend, and theer were zummat about 'n ez give
I the creeps to onct."

"Thet entry were made to-day," mused
Lilian.

"He coomed in and went oopztair and were
writen' in's room a while avore thee comed, just
vor about ten minutes. Then he went int' th'
garden, and when thee did join 'n oot theer I
zlippet oop t' have a look around. I done zo
avore to-day, I do confess, and never vound out
nothen, but zummat told I ez it were a lucky day.
Thikky book do zim t' be a zart o' diary. Theer
be entries vor most every day o' th' month right
on vrom laast year, but I didn' have no toime to
read'n praper. Mebbe they'll splain theirzels t'
Maister Poole. Just thee tell 'n vrom I, Mrs.
Lilian, ez he can trust I to howld me tongue and
thet I'd rarely like t' zee 'n hit thet Mole back
ef Mole do try and hit him, and thet ef he do

oopzet th' missus I be ready to tell her thet she've agot the best man in Darset to husband and thet her uncle weren't worth the powder and zhot ez killed 'n."

Lilian appeared to pay small heed to the last fragment of Elizabeth's discourse. She was turning over the leaves of the pocket-book, her face lightening into a grim smile as she did so.

"Whatever could a made 'n zo careless ez to drop this about?" she muttered. "Couldn' he trust's memory well enough t' keep's diary in's head? I onct heard ez the wicked were vules in the midst o' their cleverness, and I do begin t' believe 't. Thank'ee kindly, my dear. Thee've done us a good zarvice, zo thee have, and do 'ee keep it to theezel' ztrict vor awhile. I'd best be goen' to onct, avore he misses th' thing." She tied her bonnet strings with shaking hands.

"Then 'tez good-night," said Elizabeth. "I'm zorry ez thee can't wait vor Elihu, but thee'd best be gone avore Mole cooms back. Eh! Lord a mussy! Thet must be th' vurst toime thee've kissed a body in all th' while I've knowed 'ee, unless thee do kiss thikky Jehu!"

"My lass, thee've earned it!" said Lilian. "Theer! Good-night to 'ee!"

She left the house as quickly as her feet could carry her short of breaking into an undignified run, and took her former short-cut through the tanning yard before she remembered that it was growing late and that the back gate would probably be locked. However the front gate



being merely on the jar suggested that the foreman was probably still about, and she entered the yard and looked round to find him. There was no one in sight, but the back entrance proved to be only latched, and she passed out safely on to the footpath by the Ten Acre hedge. Here the mutter of voices arrested her, and she halted.

The river at this point swerved sharply away from the Ten Acre, leaving a broad strip of rough wet ground between itself and the Tannery side of the hedge. A short way along, close beside the hedge, the ground dropped into a hollow filled with a stunted mass of thorn-bushes, and as she recognized the voices Lilian, without further delay slipped quietly along the grass and down into the dip. Then she had much ado to restrain a scream, for she beheld Jehu stretched full length among the undergrowth, with his face pressed to a small gap in the hedge. He turned sharply at her arrival, then signalled to her to follow his example.

She crouched down, peering through into the field beyond. Close to the peep-hole stood a little group of three men, John Mole, King, and his attendant, Jemmy Heal. The evening breeze, setting gently toward the listeners, carried their conversation to them with some distinctness, though the murmur of the river and the rustling of leaves and reeds made it difficult to hear the words very clearly.

King was in the act of handing something to Mole, who then stepped back into the fading

afterglow and counted the contents of the packet aloud.

“One, two, three!” he counted. “Letter, deed, certificates. Good, all correct. I hope that you appreciated the handiwork, King. I’d guarantee that Mrs. Miriam herself couldn’t tell the difference from——” the rest was lost.

“Guarantee us oot o’ the country and guarantee damnation t’ Poole and that’s all ez I do ax ‘ee t’ guarantee!” growled King.

“Well then, the ‘Glory Ann’ will be at Weymouth ready to sail to-morrow all fair and square and above-board, this being an honest trip,” said Mole. “She’s due to leave about six in the morning, and if you leave here to-night after the bar is closed and folks are abed you should reach Weymouth before daybreak, going as the crow flies by the disused coach-road and avoiding the pikes. Here’s passports to use when you land at Cherbourg; never mind how I came by ‘em; these things are useful in doing business both sides of the Channel, and the descriptions fit you and Jem well enough, if you’ll change your names for the occasion. Make for La Hogue, and seek out a Monsieur Paul Barré. See, here’s the name and address. He’ll look after you if you give him that letter from me. That closes our account, don’t it?”

“ ’Tez a martal zudden vlit. Arl coontryzoide’ll be hummen’ arter we.”

“They’ll be doing that in any case afore long, I’m thinking,” said Mole significantly. “You’ve got Poole agin’ you. I always told you that you

were a fool to go against him. If you hadn't conceived such a personal spite to the man, for why God knows, and had kept your fingers off his private affairs, he'd never have raised a hand against you. It was selling his friends as did for you, and then you must needs go and meddle with his marriage."

"Damnation to Poole!" repeated King fiercely. "Don't ee taake upon theesel' t' preach to I, John Mole. Tell 'ee what; I be a rich man, and ef thee'll ruin 'n vor I or else maake a neat job o' zettlen' 'n off vor good and arl I'll pay 'ee what 'ee axes."

"I don't know about the ruining, but the other matter is more in your line than in mine, I fancy," said Mole drily. "Try another glass of doctored ale and a bullet afterwards, like you served to McQueen, if you care to linger on about here and give the Excise the chance that it wants."

"Here, howld thee vule tongue!" exclaimed King angrily. "S'pose there was anyone to hear thee?"

"You've been talking pretty free yourself," retorted Mole, "but there's no one about; I had a good look as I came. However you and I have had about enough of each other, so I'll be going."

"Bide a minute. What be'st 'ee goen' t' do wi' they paapers now thee've got 'n back? I'd rarely like t' know ez thee'd used 'n t' knock the bottom out o' Poole's mattermony. Hit 'n

through th' 'ooman, through thikky Vrenchy
Miriam ef thee can't do no more."

"Good land man, haven't we done that already? Ain't that what's brought him posting back home alone? You know Poole. Do you imagine that he'll ever live with her again? What more do you want, you vindictive old devil? Whatever makes you hate him so?"

"Never thee mind. What be'st 'ee goen' t' do wi' they paapers?"

"Whatever seems to be the best paying thing," said Mole. "That's my business now. Yours is to get out of here with a whole skin. I'll say good-night to you both, and goodbye into the bargain, for we shan't meet again."

King did not respond. He drew a trifle closer to the hedge, and stood beside Jemmy watching Mole as he went through the gate which led on to the footpath by the tannery door. When the agent had disappeared he gave vent to the most profane of a goodly store of oaths.

"Theer a goes!" he said bitterly. "Well, I'm easier now I've paid'n off."

"I b'ain't!" said Jemmy, "I dinnot trust 'n, nor's Mister Paul Barry neither. I zez, dinnot go a nigh 'n maister."

They moved away, vanishing round a barn, and after a few cautious minutes had elapsed Jehu raised himself from the damp ground and helped Lilian to her feet. Without a word he led the way back to the path, then, catching her light little figure up into his arms, he sped along

the track until they had turned the corner of the buildings, when he set her down and they pursued their way to the high-road in silence. Then, with the hard chalky highway safely beneath their feet, he spoke.

"How much did 'ee hear, mother?" he asked.

"Perty near all. What'll 'ee do now, Jehu, about King? Shall 'ee let'n escape?"

"No. Some day he'd turn up to harm Miriam. He and I must settle the account to-night, after this. What's this?" Lilian was holding out to him the little black note-book.

"Put it in thee pockut and zee when thee gets home," she replied. "'Tez Mole's own diary."

"Eh! What!"

"Coom along quick. This here ain't no place vor talken'." She hurried on ahead, and he followed her and came up with her laughing under his breath in spite of himself.

"Mother," he said, "you are amazing!"

"Thee can thank Mrs. Burbage vor thikky, not I," replied Lilian, and would say no more on the subject. They walked onward into the golden grey of the evening, Jehu filled with turbulent thought, Lilian conscious of the intense weariness of reaction. Her old eyes stared before her across the rising land, gazing through the glamourous dusk down into the reeking gutters of Ram Alley and that miserable past, from the results of which not forty years of faithful penance had availed to free her.

"Poole," she muttered, "Poole! What be

wrong wi' th' naame o' Poole thet it should
allus bring trouble on the innercent? 'Tez a
curset vamily, and the devil must a had a share
in founden' of it."

CHAPTER XVII

ELIHU BURBAGE and his wife had gone to bed, Kath'rin's taper was extinguished, and in the sanctuary of the best bedchamber John Mole, in a state of undress, was emptying the contents of his valise and of the wardrobe and chest of drawers on to his bed in a feverish search for some lost treasure. Finding that these places did not contain it he pulled out the dressing-table from the wall and peered behind without success, then, muttering curses, he fell to turning out the pockets of all his clothing. Finally he seated himself on the edge of the bed and fell a-thinking.

He had made the last entry in his diary just before going out into the garden where Lilian had found him. Various other books and papers had been spread about on the dressing-table at the time, and these he had carefully put away in the valise, and had been under the impression that the note-book was among them, but he could not be certain that he had not, in a moment of abstraction, slipped it into his coat or

waistcoat pocket instead. In any case it was not there now, so that he must either have dropped it or else it had been stolen. What if Lilian were the thief? Yet that was hardly possible unless she had learnt to become an expert pickpocket since her London days. He had known her then to be a clever copyist and meekly to have helped her husband in the disposal of ill-gotten gains, but she had never possessed the needful courage or agility to be trusted in the delicate task of actual stealing. Possibly the pocket-book was at that minute lying out in the garden or orchard, in which case it must not remain there another second for any chance prowler to find. Mole rose quickly from his seat and pulled on his coat. Picking up the candle he crept out of the room, along the passage, and downstairs to the tiny hallway, then, moving more freely, he tip-toed to the backdoor and unfastened the bolts and bars.

A lantern hung on a nail in the back porch, and he lit it from his bedroom candle, which he afterwards carefully blew out; then, closing the door behind him and covering up the lantern with his coat until only a single patch of light was thrown before him about his feet, he walked slowly over his track of that morning, without result.

A heavy dew had fallen, and by the time that he had searched the orchard his feet, encased in nothing stouter than a pair of carpet slippers, were soaked and icy cold in spite of the warm

night. He retraced his steps, narrowly scanning either side of the path, and came to a standstill again in the porch, a cold fear creeping through his pulses. What about trying the Ten Acre? He might have dropped the book there.

He slipped round the house to the front, stood quiet in the shadow while the watchman paced past, and took advantage of the man's back being turned on him before the end of his beat to glide across the street to the Tannery door. It was locked, but the duplicate key which he had wrung out of the reluctant Elihu was in his pocket, and in a few seconds he stood safely within the yard. Without further pause he crossed to the back exit and let himself out on to the path.

The night was starlit, and filled with the melody of the river and the eerie hooting of owls. Reeds rustled, grasses waved mysteriously, and if Mole had not been too anxiously occupied with his search for his lost property he might have felt as though the whole dew-clean night and its children of air and earth were conspiring in whispers for his undoing. He opened the gate into the Ten Acre and lowered his lantern into the thick grass as he peered about, nose to the earth. The dull thud of hoofs and murmur of subdued voices brought him upright with a start, and then, by the dim star-light, he recognised King and Heal as they led their laden mounts out from among the barns towards the track.

The lantern, sunk amid the standing hay and

close among the undergrowth of the hedge, gave little more illumination than a glow-worm. Mole hastily covered it yet closer and sat down noiselessly beside it. The fugitives passed close to him, pausing to unfasten the gate which had re-shut itself after him.

"Did 'ee voind'n, maister?" he heard Jem ask.

"Yes, hereabout in th' grass arter we comed back when Mole'd gone."

"Give'n to I, then. Thee'll drop'n agin vor zure and tez too vallyble to lose. Mole'd give summat vor't, I dew reck'n."

King growled some incoherent response and fumbled for a second in his wallet before passing some small object over to his henchman. Jemmy pocketed it and held open the gate for his master, who went on ahead while Jemmy lingered to readjust his saddle.

"Ride on a bit, maister," he called cautiously. "This here passle ain't quite zafe vixed. I'll voller 'ee in a minute."

The sounds of King's horse's hoofs died away, and Jem bent silently to the refractory strapping. A mad fear fell upon Mole. They had found it, found the note-book which would convey so little to a casual outsider but so dangerously much to King! He must get it back at once, and in the moment of unreasoning panic John Mole acted on his criminal instinct instead of with his usual level common-sense. Fatally close to his hand lay a large clasp-knife, the perpetual inmate of

his coat-pocket. He opened it swiftly and leapt upon Jemmy from behind.

The frightened horse swerved, striking out madly with iron-shod heels as it bolted, catching Jemmy full on the temple even as Mole's knife sank into the gap between neck and collar-bone. The two men fell over together, but Mole was up in an instant, shaking from head to foot, terrified at his own insensate folly.

Jemmy Heal lay limp at his feet, and from the wound, where the knife remained sticking, blood spurted villainously, but by some miracle none had fallen on Mole's dress. He stood listening intently, but the horse had come to a stop on the far-side of the Ten Acre, and but for a faint nickering was making no sound. There was no hint of King's immediate return, and Jem had not even had time for a groan before he fell. Mole began to recover his wits. He brought the lantern close and drew the knife out of the wound carefully, wiping it on the grass when he had done so. His deft fingers next explored Jem's every pocket with lightning quickness, but found nothing in the shape of a pocket-book except a flat brown leather wallet containing a folded list of names. This was evidently the object which had been dropped and recovered, and as he unfolded it for a glimpse at its significance Mole saw that it was a list of King's tools and confederates, and also, apparently, of such people as he found it wise to keep under observation, for Joe Tyler's name appeared early in the list crossed out with a faint line, as was

McQueen's just below it, while further down came the names of Jehu Poole and himself, both marked by a slight tick. As the key to many villainies it was no doubt, valuable, but of no manner of use to Mole in his present situation, though he thrust it hurriedly into his breast, not wishing to leave a paper containing his name on the dead man's body. This done, he stood up, put out the lantern, and listened.

There was no other sound in the meadows than the call of owls and the steady babble of water; even the horse had stopped its nickering and seemed to have returned to the stable. Mole retraced his steps through the gate, and, walking over the sopping ground to the edge of the river-bank in his haste to rid himself of all trace of the crime, threw the knife far out into the water. A momentary flash of leaping drops sprang up from the centre of the current, and he turned and fled to the Tannery door, aware of colder and wetter drops which had sprung out upon his forehead. As he fumbled at the latch, hampered by his hasty fear and the darkness, a new terror smote him, for his feet were thick with mud and he must have left the unmistakable prints of his wide-toed carpet slippers all about the bank of the stream. Without pausing to reason further he tore off his incriminating footgear, ran back madly to the water, and flung them hysterically after the knife, recognising too late the insanity of his act as he saw them, lit by a faint bar of moonlight, racing boat-wise down-stream to an inaccessible harbourage against a clump of water-

weed near the opposite bank, where the course of the river swerved abruptly away. There they remained, his familiar carpet slippers, well known in the Burbage household, for had not Kath'rin warmed them every night at the kitchen fire, because Mr. Mole, even in summer, suffered so much from cold toes? He stood stock still for a second, stunned into horrified inaction by this third piece of his own tremendous foolishness, then he flew back to the Tannery, covering the ground with prints of bare feet as he fled, tore open the door, and stumbled blindly over the littered yard, cutting his feet cruelly as he went. At the front entrance he paused, but the watchman had retired into his box some small distance away and seemed to be sleeping. Mole slipped safely over the street into the haven of Elihu's garden. Regardless of pain he covered the distance to the back-door in breathless haste, felt for the doused candle, pushed open the door, and felt his way more cautiously through the dark kitchen and entry. From thence up to his bedroom the geography of his route was simple, and he had closed his door and struck a light from the flint and steel on the table by the bed within ten minutes from his flight through the tannery.

By the flickering candlelight he looked round the disordered room like a man waking from a nightmare, then peered down at his bleeding feet, and sank heavily into a chair.

The unimaginable had come to pass. He, John Mole, who had never, to the best of his

remembrance, lost his head, had followed King's contagious example and given way to a sudden panic. The loss of his diary, coming to him on the very crest of his recent jubilation, had dropped his mind into a trough of fears. Jem's words to King had startled him out of his senses, and his every action since had been a piling of folly upon folly. He felt sick with fear, pain, and a futile rage against himself and the circumstances which had been his undoing.

After a minute of recollection he rose again and began to pack feverishly, tossing aside the bulk of his wardrobe and filling his valise with his books and writing materials. His hand fell upon the papers destined for Jehu Poole, and he stopped his preparations for flight for the fraction of a second to think. What should he do with them? Could they serve him at all in this pass?

A gleam of hope shone in on his disordered mind. His only chance of escape from justice lay in reaching the coast and leaving the country as quickly as possible. He could not get at his own horse, which was still stabled at the Crows, without running too serious a risk, and Elihu only kept a couple of cobs in the stable near his house; the one his own easy-going mount, whom no power on earth could shake into a faster pace than a jog-trot, the other the beast which he usually drove in his gig, which had been working all day and was therefore useless for a sharp forced ride at midnight. If he was to make for the coast, Mole knew that he must do so on his

own legs, but at that rate it would be impossible to get clear of danger before the hue and cry was raised. But, with these documents in his hand, he might be able to buy shelter at the Downs Farm, the last spot in which the authorities were likely to search for him, and Poole might even be persuaded to smuggle him down to the sea with the aid of some of his friends among the smugglers. Poole knew the murdered Jem to have been in his turn a murderer and, indirectly, a helper in King's scheme of blackmail which had so suddenly fallen through. Apart from other considerations he was hardly likely to hand Jem's slayer over to justice, nor, judging by his appearance and reputation, to lay violent hands upon anyone, even his personal enemy, who sought sanctuary from the savagery of the law. King, if he had returned to find out the reason for Heal's delay in following him, was probably flying toward Weymouth at a redoubled pace after his discovery of the summary justice which had overtaken his assistant in crime, and nothing need be feared from him unless, by chance, he failed to make good his escape. It went sorely against the grain of Mole's pride to be forced into asking mercy and help from Jehu, and more especially from Lilian, but it was his only chance, and a comparatively good one at that. As he shaped his course of action in his mind he dressed rapidly, putting on his easiest pair of shoes over his loosest stockings after he had bandaged his feet with strips of torn up towel. Once more

emptying his valise he exchanged it for a saddle-bag which could be strapped to his shoulders, into which he crammed his money and documents, and, leaving all else to its fate, he crept out of the room and away.

In the quiet garden he halted to consider his route. Muckleford boasted no regular Watch, and the old gentleman who paraded before the Tannery was merely a servant of Elihu's, placed on nightly guard since the occasion on which some lads had made a night-raid on the tanning yard and carried off a few tools. His beat ended at the turn of the Tannery wall, and opposite this turning stood a little cul-de-sac, at one side of Elihu's house, into which his stable-yard opened. This was up the street in the direction which Mole must take to reach the high-road for the Downs Farm, for the short-cut by the Ten Acre was now out of the question. He hastened to the stables and through the yard, fumbled profanely in a tool-shed for the key of the solid gates, which was kept hanging on a nail among hanks of twine and painfully aggressive coils of wire, and at last found himself free in the lane outside just as the church clock boomed twelve solemn strokes over the roofs of the little slumbering township.

* * * * * *

Some ten miles away, in a gorse filled hollow on the side of a steep hill up whose crest ran the

original but now disused coach-road, a black shadow waited patiently among the other shadows for an expected quarry. However hard-pressed a fugitive might be, if he sought to avoid the pikes by taking this route he must dismount to climb the height, if his beast was to resume any speed at the top of it. The track was half-obliterated by weeds and grass, but yet its original chalk, newly wetted by rain, made it slippery. Jehu calculated upon King's horse and Heal's being pretty heavily laden with their cash and valuables, and he lay in grim wait, one loaded pistol ready in his hand, another lying on a coat beside him.

To his left, some hundred yards distant, the new road ran past, turning away from the old, for until that point was reached the two had remained identical, and the new curve had been made in order to avoid the steep rise of the original Roman way. Lying in the hollow Jehu could hear every possible passenger on the main road, but for the last hour nothing had gone by. The last thing to pass the turning had been a waggon, travelling toward Muckleford.

He had calculated his time carefully, and had been in his waiting-place ever since the hour at which the Crows usually closed its bar. King and Heal should pass now at any moment.

The downs around him were full of strange cries and suggestions of squeaking field-mice. At first, resting in the shadow and filled with his turbulent hate, he had not been aware of them,

but as his pulses quietened under the influence of the prolonged vigil he heard the curious conversational whispering all about him, as it were the very talk of elves and pixies. It seemed to grow in volume as he strained his ears for the first hint of flying hoofs, and he was almost moved to lift a warning hand to command silence from murmurous Nature, who so thrust her words and whisperings in between a man's tense senses and the heavier sound which they awaited. Time dragged interminably, time and thought. His mind travelled wearily around and around the central theme of Miriam's good name and the desperate means which he was about to employ in its salvation. Briefly all now rested upon the question as to which man would prove the quickest shot, himself or King or Jemmy Heal. Even under the present conditions he could not bring himself to fire from behind the shelter of the gorse-bushes.

He rested his pistol on his knee and looked at his watch by the light of a shaded lantern. Half-past twelve. If King hoped to reach Weymouth by daybreak surely he must come here soon. Jehu replaced the timepiece in his waistcoat pocket and took up the pistol again just as an echo of far-off hoof-beats, coming along the main road at breakneck speed, smote upon his ear. Nearer they came, drumming madly along the well-made road. He raised himself into an easier attitude, breathing shortly. Drum, drum, drum; the rider was reaching the fork; drum,

drum, drum; here he was; a second more, and the sound would change to the duller thud of hoofs on turf. Ah! No! The fellow was following the high-way after all, and he was alone.

Jehu sprang to his feet and ran to the join of the roads. A dimly discerned rider was rapidly vanishing in the distance under the slight radiance of a watery moon, but despite the poor light he could almost have sworn to the man's long back and awkwardly stiff legs. King, beyond a doubt, and King bolting from some close pursuer. Jehu drew aside and waited to see what followed. Nothing came.

After waiting a while longer he returned to his former post to collect his belongings and then began to walk back towards Muckleford, but he came within the boundary of the Downs Farm property without encountering any living creature beyond a travelling hedgehog. Something must have happened to Heal. Perhaps he had been arrested while his master escaped, but in that case it was odd that no one had followed in pursuit.

He strolled slowly to the farm house itself, and stood with a hand on the latch of his front gate still listening for some fresh rider along the high-road. After several minutes of fruitless waiting, he walked round to the kitchen door, beneath which a streak of light told him that Lilian still sat watching for his return, and, lifting the latch, stepped in on a tableau which brought him to a standstill when barely over the threshold.

By the big deal table stood Lilian, her eyes blazing and a carving knife in her hand, while before her, white, dishevelled, but yet retaining a show of amused disdain, stood Mole. The picture dissolved on the instant, Lilian dropping the weapon with a clatter and Mole wheeling sharply about to face the master of the house, but Jehu had had time to read and interpret the scene. He slammed the door to and caught Mole by the collar. The fellow made not the smallest resistance, but immediately collapsed into a limp bundle of clothes and hung helplessly from Jehu's hand.

"He'm zwounded, Jehu," said Lilian, faintly. "I were ztandin' wi' me back to th' door when I heared zummon coom in, and I thinks ez it were thee and turned aboot to vaace'n. He just zaid, 'Lilian,' and I znatched oop thikky knife; then thee coomed." She leant heavily on the table before sitting down.

"What the devil is the fellow after?" said Jehu, laying Mole full length on the floor and loosening his neckerchief. "Is he bolting too? I've missed King, Lilian. He went by the fork on the new road, going like hell with nobody after him; no sign of Heal. Hello! you're coming to, are you? What's the meaning of this?"

Mole sat up waveringly, leant forward, and clasped his face in his hands for a minute before accepting the offer of Jehu's arm and staggering to the settle. This seat being close to the wide kitchen fireplace, where a brisk fire burnt still upon the hearth, the heat promptly overcame

him a second time, and he displayed an inclination to fall face-down among the coals until Jehu had poured a tot of brandy down his throat, when he pulled himself together and began to speak.

"Lilian's a fool," he said bitterly. "She might have seen with half an eye that I could not hurt her. I'm spent with running over the Downs with feet in this condition." He thrust forward a foot, pulling off his shoe as he did so, and revealing a blood-soaked stocking. "She always was a fool," he continued, "frightened at nothing. You owe me a debt, Mr. Poole. I've killed Heal. The hue and cry will be out before long. I've brought you the papers that you wot of as the price of shelter and help out of the country, thinking that you'd scarce give me up for settling half your score for you."

"You've killed Heal!" echoed Jehu. "What! did he and King turn dangerous to you in spite of your friend, M. Paul Barré, and the passport?"

"Eh? How do you know of that?"

"There were witnesses at your interview with King and Heal in the Ten Acre," replied Jehu. "I have been wasting more than three hours waiting at Saddler's Rise for King, and he travelled after all by the highway and rode as if the devil were after him. How did you come to kill Jem?"

"I was out in the Ten Acre a while after eleven," said Mole, "looking for something I dropped there. King and Heal came out with

their horses and I lay low, and from what they said I believed that they meant to play me false. King rode on ahead and Jem stayed to fasten his packs, and some devil took possession of me. I sprang at him, like a fool, and stabbed him, and then left such traces as are bound to betray me. I cut my feet escaping across the tanning yard in the dark, and have been forced to ask mercy from you, Mr. Poole. It is my only chance, and I will remind you that to refuse me and to hand me over to the law, means that I shall speak on that which you are trying so hard to keep secret."

Mole had always been abstemious, and perhaps the fumes of the raw spirit had combined with fatigue to dull his perceptions, or he must have understood the danger of using threats to a desperate man, the need for diplomacy to secure his own safety, and the madness of provoking the one person who could save him from death. Jehu, who had turned aside to put the glass down, wheeled round, and on the instant John Mole sat petrified, his terrified gaze held by the light in Jehu's black eyes. All further power of collected thought and speech deserted him; he stared back helplessly as a man might stare at a crouching tiger.

" You double damned fool," said Jehu, with deliberation. " Haven't I just told you that I've lain in wait for three hours to shoot King, ay, and Heal as well? D'ye think that I have more respect for your life than for theirs? " He drew

a long breath. "I wish that I had met you on the Down," he cried fiercely, "you'd not have lived to reach here, but I suppose that I cannot choke you on my own hearth, vermin though you are. However, if I save your skin it will be at my own price. You understand? You will give me everything in your possession, and I will return to you what I choose. You will sign a statement which I will dictate to you, and you will bide here as my prisoner until I can find a means of ridding this country of you; and if you show fight, or dispute with me, by God, hearth or no hearth, I'll choke you as I'd choke a weazole. What! D'ye think that ye can work hand in glove with a set of villains to ruin me and someone dearer to me than myself and then, because you have run your damned neck into a noose, that I am to save you on your own terms, that you can threaten and bully me as you thought you were bullying Lilian here? Do ye know that we have enough evidence without this last matter of Heal to hang you five times if we chose? D'ye imagine that I should be so great a fool as to let you hang and betray my affairs when my own hands can do the work as well and better, without firing a shot or waking a soul?" He stepped swiftly to Mole's side, and clapped his palm to his lips. "One cry, Mole," he said, more calmly, "and out you go like a snuffed candle. A gag here, Lilian, or this fellow will lose his senses and become his own judge and jury."

Lilian had already torn off her linen kerchief,

and fashioned it deftly to his need. Jehu thrust it between Mole's teeth and secured it firmly, then he picked up a length of cord which he had flung down at his entry and proceeded to tie Mole's legs to the legs of a chair on to which he transferred him from the settle. After this, without paying the least attention to the prisoner's choked protests, he laid the saddle-bag on the table and carefully examined its contents. Almost the first thing which came to hand was the packet of forgeries and Oliver Poole's second letter. These he examined closely.

"I have gathered from your talk this evening with King and also from your diary," he said, holding aloft the documents, "that these are copies and that the original papers which King took from McQueen were those which you contrived to hide in Mrs. Miriam's trunk."

He again turned his shoulder to the tethered man and continued his researches among the contents of the saddle-bag, setting aside a notebook and one or two papers, exclaiming with satisfaction as he did so. Returning the money and personal belongings to the bag he closed and strapped it and stood up.

"That book and these papers I keep," he said, "the rest you shall take with you when you leave. Now, Lilian, we had better take him into the study and he shall write and sign the statement we require. I had always hoped to be in a position to force you to do that, Mole, but you have exceeded my wildest hopes in coming so to this place with your life in your hand. Will thee

carry the light, mother, while I carry this?" He lifted both chair and occupant, and half-carried it across the entry in Lilian's wake. Mole clung feverishly to the arms of his throne and grunted helplessly.

Inside the study Jehu set him down at the writing-table, put paper, pen and ink before him, and then locked the door. Lilian set the candle where its rays best lit up both the paper and Mole's face. Jehu put the pen into his hand and began to dictate; Mole after one second of hesitation, began to write tremulously:

"I, John Mole, of Wood Street, in the city of Westminster, and of Pye Street, being guilty of attempted blackmail, do hereby undertake to hold my tongue now and for ever concerning Jehu Poole, of the Downs Farm, in the county of Dorset, and his wife, Mrs. Miriam McQueen, of Dorchester, and both their families and affairs, in consideration of valuable services rendered to me by the said Jehu Poole."

This curious statement having been duly signed and witnessed by Lilian, Jehu folded it up and placed it with the other papers in his wallet.

"I doubt that this will make much difference to your words and acts once you are out of England, Mole," he remarked, "but it will be my business to see that you are sent to a part of the world where your talk will be of little account. The hue and cry will be out in a few hours, so

that we must now bestow you out of reach of any discovery. Where shall we put him, mother?"

"There's the little room ahint my wardrobe," said Lilian, eagerly. "Thik ez has the walled oop winder and ez we don't ever use."

"I'd forgot its existence," said Jehu, "that's the very place. My mother believed it to be haunted, Mole, and to please her when she lay adying, my father bricked in the window and locked the door and set Lilian's great wardrobe across it. My mother used to be carried out into the orchard in the summer and was fearful of a face from the other world looking down on her from the panes, which accounts for the blocking of the glass. Ye'll find it a bit small and dark, but safe."

He untied Mole's feet and took him by the arm. Lilian again leading the way with the candle they went noiselessly upstairs and into a big musty deserted bedroom. Here again the door was locked and Mole sat down on a faded chair while Jehu bent his great strength to the removal of a heavy wardrobe from its station against a certain patch of wall-space. This done a plain oak door came to light, the lock of which corresponded with that of the bedroom. Unlocking it with the same key after some little difficulty, owing to the stiffness of the rusty lock, Jehu held up the light to illumine a small dressing-room no larger than a big cupboard, close and dank from long exclusion from the day. It was quite bare.

"Open the bedroom window and keep the shutters wide for a while, mother," said Jehu. "Mole should be fond of the dark, but we must not suffocate him. I'll take the gag out when all's ready. You let it alone, or your hands 'll be tied, though you cannot undo a smugglers' gag unless you do know the trick," he added, addressing Mole who was furtively struggling with the kerchief. "That's well, mother. Now a man can breathe. While we are airing the cell we can give it a little furniture." He pushed in an armchair covered with dull red tapestry and a small bedside table. Lilian departed to reappear with a couple of rugs and a pillow, and after she had melted away again at Jehu's suggestion in quest of a supply of food and drink, he removed the gag and the prisoner was free to speak. He seemed, however, to have nothing to say, but sat rubbing and licking his sore lips in vindictive silence, until curiosity overcame his anger.

"Where d'ye mean to ship me off to, Mr. Poole?" he asked.

"That depends upon what ship I can find willing to take you," replied Jehu, "but it will not be to any place in the old world, at any rate. We shall see." Mole asked no further question.

Ten minutes later he flung himself, worn out, on the floor of his cell, and heard the key grate in the lock after him. Followed the sound of the wardrobe being pushed back into its place and of retreating footsteps, and he was alone with a

supply of food and candles, and the company of an excited mouse scratching in the woodwork. Too exhausted to realize anything but his present safety John Mole fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

By noon of the following day the countryside was ringing with the combined news of Jem Heal's murder, King's flight, and the disappearance of John Mole. William Quent, a perspiring man on a drenched cob, arrived at the Downs Farm to discuss it with his friend, and found Jehu in close confabulation with his old cousin and house-keeper. The pair greeted his arrival with the interchange of a meaning glance, and William, somewhat mystified, watched while Jehu closed his study door and locked it before settling down to conversation.

"What's that for, Jehu?" he asked. "Dost 'e know aught about this here business?"

"I know pretty well all," replied Jehu. "Jem Heal's murderer is shut up in this house just above our heads."

"Who is't?"

"Mole, the fellow that's missing, of course. Allow me to explain, for I need your assistance, William. Mole has been trying to blackmail me over a private matter, which I am not at liberty

to discuss, Will, even with you. He was King's agent in London—doubtless the name is familiar to you—and came down here on King's business. We were right about McQueen's murderers, and Mole was privy to their guilt. They quarrelled, and Mole dissolved partnership and warned 'em to leave the country because the excise was on them. King rode on ahead last night for Weymouth but Mole met Heal in the Ten Acre, lost his senses and killed the man, leaving his traces all about. He then fled, panic-stricken, to me and flung himself on my mercy. At the price of certain documents I have agreed to smuggle him out of the old world, and I want your help in conveying him aboard some boat off Poole or Weymouth. I have heard that the Avon Belle sails on Friday for Georgia with a cargo of convicts for the plantations. The captain receives twenty shillings a head for every man whom he lands alive, and would doubtless appreciate the addition of another to his gang. Can you arrange the matter for me?"

William sat for a second with his mouth open. Then he rubbed his hand slowly along his knee and spoke again.

"Could 'ee kindly tell I all that again, Jehu? I b'ain't sartain ez I've got'n right."

Jehu complied with the request.

"Whatever have 'ee been up to t' get blackmailed?" queried the fat Dorsetman, when the recital was completed. "Hows'iver I'll do what I can vor'ee. This Mole, now; he desarves hangin', not vor zettlin' oop wi' Jem, but vor th' black-

mail. B'ain't it zafe vor 'ee to let'n hang? Be you obliged to make this bargain?"

"I'll tell you this much, Will," said Jehu, wearily. "The documents which I spoke of were those found by King on McQueen's body, and their publication would grievously harm my . . . Miriam. It is of the first necessity that she should know nothing whatever of all this affair, and Mole has bartered the papers to me in exchange for his life."

"I zee." Quent cogitated for a moment. "Well," he added regretfully, "I reck'n ez them plantations in Georgia can be a very fair imitation o' hell, by account, though I'd prefer to zend the rascal t' zample the real thing. I'll do the best I can for 'ee and for Mrs. Miriam; but thee'll never get'n aboard thik ship in's zane zenses, man. Thee'll hev' t' gie'n a draught. Tell 'ee what. Doctor gie'd I zome vamous ztuff vor th' faace-ache. I wur vair crazed wi't and wi' want o' zleep, and doctor he made I oop a bottle o' zummat and telled I t' be special keerful to tak' small doses. As t'were I zlep vor twenty-four hour, and skeered my old housekeeper praper: Thik's th' ztoof vor our vriend Mole."

"Good. About getting him away from here. I could put him under some trusses of hay if you can lend a hand in the removal and arrange for a boat to take him aboard the ship."

"I'll zee the Cap'n. He'm a vine villain himsel', but there's a plenty o' matters as I knows on vor to buy his silence wi'. Mole can't do no harm wi'out them paapers, can'n?"

"No. I have every single document and his own diary of villainies."

"Hev' 'ee? Well, now! How'd 'ee coom by thik laast?"

"Ask Lilian here."

Lilian grimly recounted her own dealings with Mole, and William, stirred beyond measure, slapped her on the back with a hand so heavy that it all but knocked the little old creature off her seat. Then, drawing his chair close to Jehu, he expounded his suggestions, leaving shortly after with the intention of changing his horse and making immediately for the seaport of Poole. Two days later he returned with matters arranged to his satisfaction with the skipper of the Avon Belle. On Friday John Mole emerged from his dark sanctuary to the light, not of day but of a cool short-breathed May evening.

It was a pity that he was too thoroughly asleep at the time to appreciate the change, but on the other hand his slumbers mitigated the discomfort of a living burial beneath many trusses of hay, and of his subsequent conveyance, none too gentle, down a break-neck cliff path to a shingly beach, and thence into a tossing row-boat in which, under normal conditions, he would infallibly have been desperately sea-sick. He did not entirely awake until the Avon Belle swung out to sea past Portland Bill, and over that awakening, in the hold of a convict-ship bound for the Georgian plantations, laden with its living cargo of malefactors, Charity draws a veil of silence.

Jehu and William returned to the farmstead under a flood of soft moonlight. Sitting by the kitchen fire as they had sat on that fateful evening of September, Jehu at last broached the subject of his own departure.

"Will," he said, "there's yet another good turn that you can do me."

"What now?"

"I am obliged to cross over to France in a few days' time; there is still a small matter regarding Miriam's affairs which I can only settle by doing so, and my visit may be unavoidably prolonged. Also there is some danger, and if anything should happen to me, Will, you're my executor and . . . thee'll take care of Miriam, eh?"

"Damnation to all this mystery, Jehu! I wish 'ee could speak out plain, but I taakes thee word that thee cannot. Ef there's to be danger, why not let I coom along too? I can shoot ez straight ez th' next man, though I bain't oop t' sword-plaay."

"'Tis out of the question. But look'ee, Will. Ye've been, in a manner o' speaking, my one close friend all these years. Ye've grumbled at me and done me services from our schooldays . . . in short, I know 'ee and I love 'ee. So I ask 'ee to take care of Miriam if anything happens to me."

"If aught happens to 'ee I'll hunt down whoever did it and send'n to hell," replied Quent fiercely. "Lad, must 'ee go? Ain't there no help I can give 'ee?"

"I must go. Will, if you knew the truth you

would be the first to send me. Ye'll do as I ask?"

"To be zure." William was silent for some time, his ale untasted at his elbow.

"Jehu," he said at last, "tez a hard task ye've set I. Ain't thee never guessed what I do veel vor Mrs. Miriam?"

Jehu stirred slightly, then reached a large hand across and touched Quent's.

"If I should die, Will, marry her," he said briefly; "marry her and keep her safe. Good-night."

He was gone, into the shadows.

CHAPTER XIX

THREE weeks had passed since Jehu had left her, and Miriam Poole sat reading and re-reading the letter which the mail-coach had again brought her in lieu of her husband.

Miriam's heart was heavy. Mme. de Nivers' hospitality was warm and willing, but already tongues wagged inquisitively around the young wife's grass-widowhood, and M. de Nivers, daily more attentive to her, was beginning to assume the character of a waking nightmare in her tired thoughts. Madame refused to be disturbed by the whisperings of spite, and regarded her husband's growing infatuation and increasing senility with patient contempt. Nevertheless it was obvious to Miriam that the situation was rapidly becoming untenable, and that, willy-nilly, she must shortly return to Dorsetshire. She was moreover, now aware of an additional reason for her craving for the Downs Farmhouse, with its peaceful routine, and the first sparkle had died out of her cup of pleasure. Distressful glimpses into the poorer life of the city troubled her imagination; glimpses of reeking gutters and

sweltering alleys, the homes of unspeakable beggars who haunted the better thoroughfares. The country hovels might offer squalor enough, in truth, but there at least, there was a possible escape into the clean air. These miserable towns-folk seemed to be penned in with their filth like neglected beasts.

“ My dear Love,” wrote Jehu, “ I am sore disappointed that I cannot return to fetch you home this week, but am obliged to trespass yet longer upon our kind friends’ hospitality. A mort of unexpected business hath cropped up concerning the matter which you know of, and ’tis now likely that I shall have to cross the Channel ere I can come to London. I may not tell thee more at present, but this much will, I trust, free thee from too great anxiety of mind : justice is being done upon those who have earned it. I have ever believed your uncle’s murderer to have been Master King, though I had no proof. Now, however, I have learnt the truth of my surmise, for the Excise is up and after him. Jem Heal hath been murdered, and King has fled the country, I have reason to believe for France. This matter, however, I beg of you to keep to yourself for a while longer. I can but beg for thy trust in me, and that thou wilt rest quiet in Town until I send thee word. I have writ to Madame de Nivers by this same post, but fear that I must seem to all to be a presumptuous friend and a poor husband.

“ Our cousin Lilian sendeth thee her greetings and is well. William Quent likewise sendeth his affectionate duty. Elihu hath renewed his lease.

“ My respects to all our friends, and to thee, dear soul, ever my love and honour.

“ Thy true lover,

“ JEHU POOLE.”

After the third reading of this epistle she laid it down beside her and fell to attempting the composition of a reply. She found the task harder than she had anticipated, for the struggle between commonsense and her natural inclination to ask for a fuller explanation of his conduct made self-expression difficult. Moreover, the principal item of her news she had hoped to tell him by word of mouth. Finally, recollecting that in the flurry of his departure and the distractions of her engagements and anxiety since then, she had omitted to tell him the scraps of her own family history with which Madame de Nivers had made her acquainted, she closed her letter with an account of her conversation on the night of Robert Purling's housewarming. But even as she wrote, Jehu Poole, having shaken hands for the last time with his old school-friend, had parted with William on Weymouth quay and was heading for Cherbourg, leaving behind him, in his anxiety to break every tie which might bind him to his home, no sort of address to which Lilian could forward the letter. When the packet arrived the old lady, after a glance at the handwriting of the address, dropped it, obedient to her foster-son's instructions, into the kitchen fire.

While the mail-coach carried her belated news through the green country, David Dane, somewhat troubled in mind, set out to pay a morning call.

Arrived in the neighbourhood of M. de Nivers' house, he paused to tidy up his best suit, after

which, taking his courage in both hands, he rang the bell and begged to know whether Mistress Poole was within.

Mistress Poole was within, though about to start out for a walk. She received him in Madame's sanctum. Madame herself was in attendance upon her husband, so that they had the room to themselves.

"Mistress Poole," said David awkwardly, when they had exchanged commonplaces for a few seconds and her eyes were wandering towards the face of the clock, "I am behind with the monthly payment which Mr. Poole required me to give to you, and I have called to beg your pardon. I have not a penny in the world till this day fortnight, but I will pay it to you then, I promise."

"I will wait," replied Miriam. "Dinnot allow that to trouble you."

"Thank you, kindly. When will Mr. Poole be back in Town? We shall be glad to see him again."

"He'll not be returning yet awhile," replied Miriam, unwillingly. "Can I write him any message for you?"

"Only my respects and duty," said David, meekly, "and to tell him that I am nigh recovered of my wounds."

"Ah, yes," said Miriam, a smile flying across her lips in spite of herself, "I hope that you are stronger."

David, with the zest of the born hypochondriac, launched forth into a minute description of his

recent aches and pains, but Madame appearing before he was well under weigh brought the narrative to an untimely end. There was that in the French-woman's mischievous eyes which invariably dried up the fountain of David's eloquence. It gave him a sensation of being, to all intents and purposes, as far as she was concerned, little better than a marionette dancing at the end of a string for her amusement; as though she knew his mechanism, and despised it even while she laughed. He withdrew as gracefully as he could manage, and was not consoled by distant sounds of mirth as he passed out of the ante-room. His curiosity was piqued by Jehu's prolonged absence, and his wife's evident embarrassment. He scented a faint odour of trouble and dissension in the Poole ménage, which he did not find unpleasing, for Jehu's generosity had been coupled with a clearness of perception uncomfortably akin to Madame's, and the petty heart of its recipient was galled.

But for the moment other considerations pushed the mystery of Mr. Poole's absence into the background of David's mind. He fell to cogitating over the extent of his indebtedness to John Mole, a petty moneylender to whom he had frequently had recourse, and at supper that night he proved so taciturn and unmannerly that kindly Mr. Purling, goaded suddenly into unwonted action against his dead friend's son, ordered him to leave the room. Mooning aimlessly about the upper storey, still considering the hopelessness

of his financial position and the certainty of speedy exposure to his guardian, David speedily fathomed the depths of despair, and wept himself to sleep with the unreasoning abandon of a child.

CHAPTER XX

ROBERT PURLING was riding strenuously for Cherbourg along the hot roads of France. By dint of hard travelling and free spending he had finished his task of collecting the evidences of Miriam Poole's origin sooner than he had expected.

The legal firm of Beaupergne had changed hands, but was still well known in Lyons under its original name. The new partners had obligingly delved the originals of Jehu's documents from the depths of an ancient strong room, and a comparison with the copies which Robert produced completely proved their authenticity. The firm had done no business for the de Lomagne family since the date of the deaths of Lukis and his wife, and then, oddly enough, the will had been left in other keeping. Precisely why the heirs, who lived near Paris, had never claimed the other papers the partners could not tell. In fact, never having had any dealings with them personally, since the business had not come to them until many years after, they knew no more of Lukis or of his relatives than these scanty records which had lain for

so long, neglected, in the dark. But just as Robert, with the ratification of the paper of adoption and the certificates of marriage and baptism in his pocket was about to remount and continue his journey to Marseilles, an old and breathless clerk followed him into the street with a little more information.

He had been with the firm in the days of the first partners, he said, and recollected that M. de Lomagne had possessed a daughter of his own beside the daughter of his adoption. To the best of the old fellow's memory the Christian names of the two girls had been identical, but one or other of them had generally been known to her family circle by the abbreviation of "Sylvette"; which one, however, he could not tell. He had an idea that Lukis' own daughter had become a Benedictine at Fontevrault, and possibly she was yet alive and could supply Monsieur with further details if he desired them. As her father's heiress she would have been bound to inherit such of his property as could not be left to his cousins in Paris, though, doubtless, it had passed into the hands of the Order. Robert thanked him thoughtfully and rode away.

The present curé of S. Hilaire at Marseilles proved to be a good humoured, worldly man, who entertained Robert hospitably and gave him willing access to the church registers, which had become much disjointed during the period of the Plague, but for some time before that date were in good order. The entries of both marriage and baptism soon came to light, and Robert turned

homeward with the required evidence in his keeping along with the signed statement of the lawyers. He made by as direct a route as possible for the coast of Normandy, although Conscience, jogging at his elbow, continually urged him to turn aside to Fontevrault.

Fontevrault, persisted Conscience, might contain some final explanation of his friend's entanglement. Fontevrault, replied Robert Purling's desire, could not possibly supply anything which was not a further unneeded confirmation of that which Lyons and Marseilles had already confirmed. There was a shadow, retorted Conscience, a mere shadow, of the possibility of confused identities. "Nonsense!" cried Desire angrily, and the wrangling warfare between the two halves of his nature drove Robert fiercely across the country. At Orleans Conscience well nigh won the victory over its opponent, but as he rested at an inn for the night the memory of Miriam's white neck and softened eyes drove honour and honesty from the field. The barrier which held him back from the woman whom he desired was broken down for ever unless he himself chose to prop it up a little longer, and Robert, who had once regarded himself as passionless, and who had been so long a-kindling, found that the fires of his love burnt the fiercer for the dryness of their fuel. Nothing now mattered to him except the speedy covering of the miles of land and water which lay between him and London, and the final clearance of his erstwhile friend Jehu from his path.

A hot jaded traveller, accompanied by a grumbling attendant, reached the port on the afternoon of a dusty June day, having ridden through storm and heat at a rate which confirmed his French servant in the opinion that he was either mad, or a rogue flying from justice. Robert was acquainted with the town and had arranged their meeting place with Jehu before leaving England, but as he rode through the street he felt suddenly disposed to linger before facing the ordeal of the meeting. He became aware of the intensity of his eagerness and of a need for composure and a becoming attitude toward a heart-broken jealous man, for which reason he picked out another inn for his own abode, engaged himself a room, and after cleansing and refreshment sallied forth to the rendezvous.

He had not far to go, nor had he any need to enquire for the expected Englishman. Jehu had been there already for a week, and was starting out for a walk when Robert arrived. The two met on the doorstep, and after a silent greeting Jehu wheeled about and led the way to the privacy of his own room.

"You have found the proofs?" he asked, when they were safely alone.

"Yes. I have the statements which you required in my pocket. Poole, I am sorry." Indeed Conscience had returned abruptly at the sight of the man's haggard face.

Jehu gave an impatient gesture.

"Sorrow'll not mend it," he said. "Let me see the letters." He broke the seals and read

the brief business-like witness of the firm of Beaupergne and the Curé of S. Hilaire. In spite of his scanty knowledge of French their purport was unmistakeable to him. He laid them down and sat very still. Robert kept silence, waiting apprehensively.

"There is nothing remains to be done, now, save to remove me out of the way," said Jehu at length. "I believe that no one is left in England who would dare to blackmail her. King, Heal and the rest are all gone."

"How so?" asked Robert, in surprise.

"Heal's dead, murdered by Mole, King's agent. King's fled the country with the Excise after him, and the only other souls who know the facts about Miriam and myself are Mole and old Lilian, whom I have left in charge of her and who can be trusted to the grave. Mole, by the way, I have had shipped off to the American plantations as the price of his life. But I forget; you knew nothing of him."

Briefly Jehu recounted the events which had culminated in the death of Jem Heal and the subsequent clearance of obstacles from the line of his plans, while Robert listened intently, his brain on the alert for any possible point of danger. There appeared to be none, and he began to breathe more freely.

"And now," said Jehu, brusquely, at the end of his recital, "when can you find me a ship for the Barbadoes?"

"To-day is the sixth of June," replied Robert, slowly. "There should be a barque of my

uncle's sailing from Plymouth on the twenty-fifth. If I cross over to-morrow I could doubtless arrange for the Captain to pick you up in the Channel at some given point, unless you care to cross direct with me to Plymouth. No?" as Jehu shook his head. "Well, you are right. I dare say that I can find a skipper to take me over to-morrow and I will return as soon as I have seen our Captain to tell you the details. I can give you an introduction to a good fellow in Barbadoes, a sugar-grower named Clark, who owns a large estate up in the country. I became well acquainted with him when he was last home in England, but he has some ancient squabble with my uncle so that the two are not on speaking terms and you are never like to meet with any mutual friend at his house. With a moderate change of appearance and an alteration in your name you should be safe enough. May I suggest that it would be wise to crop your head and adopt a correct *wig en queue?*" He glanced deprecatingly at the thick mass of hair which, in conjunction with his unusual height, singled out Jehu Poole from the general run of mankind.

"I thank you, sir," answered Jehu, indifferently, "I will do so. As for a name, I will take that of my mother's father, a common one, James Perkins. It has the advantage of my own initial letters, so that I shall be less like to forget it and confuse my own personality." He smiled rigidly.

For a few seconds Robert sat nursing his knee, deep in thought. Then he again looked up with a further suggestion.

"Poole," he said, "are you aught of a sailor? I have some knowledge of seamanship, for my boyhood was spent on the Cornish coast. My half brother's property lay a few miles inland from Falmouth, and I have often sailed a cutter about that part of the Channel. 'Tis some years now since I last did so, but if you have any sea-knowledge I would suggest that after I have arranged for your shipment we should hire or buy a cutter here, and take her across ourselves to whatever point suits our purpose on the barque's route of voyage. You could get aboard there, and if we can secure a sufficiently old boat I can abandon her close to the shore, where a rowboat can await me. It would only be a question of a plausible wreck, and you, you understand, would have been washed away. Would that fit your scheme?"

"Very well, sir. I am no seaman, but mebbe we could overcome that difficulty if we could find a boat and sail her about here awhile beforehand."

"Then I will try to get myself taken across tomorrow and return as quickly as may be."

"Ay."

Jehu relapsed into silence and sat staring vacantly at the floor. A week of helpless inaction on a strange shore had wearied him more profoundly than all the labours which had preceded it. Moreover instinct warned him that despite Robert's kindness he had already ceased to regard him as a friend or as anything but an obstacle to the attainment of his wishes. Robert was eager

to remove him, and would take any trouble to reach that end. He could not find it in his heart to be grateful to his rival for thus elaborately preparing his way of escape from dishonour.

Robert took his departure as soon as decency permitted, and spent the rest of the day in enquiring at the docks as to whether any vessel was leaving for Plymouth or that part of the English coast. Finally, after much bargaining, he obtained the desired passage, and on the following morning Jehu bid him goodbye and began a further vigil of some fourteen days, for Robert was obliged to wait for nearly a week at Plymouth before the Captain of the "Sunflower" returned from a holiday inland to rejoin his ship. Of that time of waiting Jehu carried the bitter mark to the end of his days. Sleep forsook him, and he roved feverishly about the sea-port until the huge Englishman had become one of the sights of the place, and could not stir abroad without an accompanying concourse of small vociferous boys. He filled in part of the weary days by searching for the requisite cutter, but as soon as his need was publicly known so many gesticulating owners of small sailing craft converged upon him that in self-defence he was obliged to put off any attempt at a purchase until Robert's return. When at length Robert Purling reappeared he found, in place of the massive countryman whom he had left, a gaunt giant, hollow of cheek, sleekly bewigged, and with eyes whose restive glitter alarmed Purling with visions of insanity.

The cutter was finally procured, a weather-worn little vessel of jaunty cut and meretricious beauty, and they passed the days intervening between Robert's return and the twenty-fifth of June in taking short sailing trips under the jealous eyes of the coastguards. They speedily became known as amateur sailors, but when, according to popular account, they set sail early in the morning of the twenty-fifth to cross to the English coast for a bet, such heads as had noted the inadequacy of their seamanship and the threat of the weather were shaken, and the original owner of their craft, conscience-smitten perhaps at the memory of past experiences, ventured to protest that the gentlemen could not know the dangers and difficulties which awaited them off La Hogue. Warning and counsel alike proving of no avail, quite a small company assembled to watch them set sail, and for a while an undesired flotilla persisted in accompanying them. However Robert, once they were clear of the harbour and shipping, soon revealed the true quality of his sea-powers, and presently their followers dropped away and the open Channel claimed them.

The weather prophets had not prophesied amiss. Although there was no storm there was a high wind and a heavy sea, and as they made their way towards Plymouth, keeping their course with ever increasing difficulty, until the sight of an outward bound English merchant-man assured them that they had struck the right trade-route, the thought occurred forcibly to both that

it was possible that fate intended to cut through the tangled skein of their lives by obligingly drowning both of them in real earnest. Robert, glancing from time to time at his companion, seemed to read in his face something not unlike a grim triumph, and once, as they struggled frantically with the unmanageable sail, he was sorely tempted to strike out at the dark salt-sprayed cheek so near his own. One blow, a push at the right moment, and the pretended tragedy of a drowned man could become a reality. Death, however, pressed too close upon them both at that moment to allow for striking room, and afterwards, in recovered sanity, Robert shuddered sickly at the recollection of his murderous impulse. It passed, and they toiled clumsily together, flung about by the reckless hands of the sea, beaten, battered, and soaked to the skin, until, like an angelic messenger, the West India-man bore down towards them, by which time Robert had abandoned all idea of taking the cutter further, and left her gladly for the safe decks of the "Sunflower."

The Captain, a good-humoured man, who had known Robert from boyhood, obligingly put back to hand the ship-owner's nephew into the safe keeping of a boat bound for Plymouth Harbour, and in the chill of a boisterous night, while James Perkins sat, dry-clad but taciturn, in the captain's cabin, Robert Purling lay uncomfortably amid a reek of fish and lamp oil, striving to convince himself that he had, at last, achieved his end. Poole was gone. Never again would the bulk of

that tall figure and strong character stand between him and the woman whom he, by his dilatory wooing, had all but lost. But Robert was worn with fatigue, aching, chilled to the bone, and the raw brandy with which he had been plied only served to paint one fiery word before his burning eyes—"Fontevrault."

CHAPTER XXI

IT was the morning of the twenty-ninth of June, and Mr. Purling stood, white-cheeked, with his back to the empty polished grate and the stony dignity of his library mantelpiece, an opened letter in one shaking hand and his spectacles in the other. In the kitchen a tired messenger sat eating and drinking, while he recounted to a group of thrilled domestics the burden of the news which he had brought to their master.

David Dane, a shade paler than usual, stood facing his guardian and employer, wondering wildly what he was expected to say or do in this crisis. Presently the ship-owner flung his glasses down amid his writing-materials and began to pace miserably up and down before the fireplace.

“Before God, Davy,” he cried passionately, “I could better have spared a dozen other of my friends! Poole was unique; an honest man to the core; and his poor wife. . . . How in Heaven am I to break this news to her, David, lad?”

David remained awkwardly silent. The news of his second creditor’s disappearance was not, in

his estimation, altogether an unmixed evil, yet the horror of his death by drowning touched him uncomfortably. Mr. Purling looked at him contemptuously and turned away.

"Get on with this work, then, if you have no suggestion to make," he said roughly. "I must go and see Madame de Nivers."

Pall Mall was as bright and cheerful as ever, but Mr. Purling viewed it vaguely through a fog of mental pain. He rang M. de Nivers' door-bell like a man bewildered, and followed the servant into Madame's boudoir without having framed a single sentence wherewith to acquaint her with his evil tidings. He found the two women alone, engaged in sorting out a variety of embroidery silks. M. de Nivers, it appeared, was seriously unwell and confined to his couch. Madame rose from her seat at her visitor's entry with an exclamation of surprise, and Mr. Purling pulled his wits together with a violent effort.

"I have received a letter from Robert, Madame," he said gravely, "which I should like you to read at once. I am afraid that it contains —bad news."

"Of M. Robert?"

"No. Please to read it, Madame." He thrust the crumpled paper into her hands, while Miriam looked up, frightened at his tone, from the silks which she had stooped to gather from the floor.

Madame de Nivers asked no further question, but read, as she was requested to do; and then, with a cry of horror, she turned to Miriam.

"What is it?"

Miriam snatched the letter from her friend's fingers, and there was no sound for a little eternity. Then Jehu Poole's widow rose suddenly to her feet and left the room without a word, before either Madame de Nivers or Mr. Purling had realized her intention.

They stood gazing blankly at one another, while far away the door of Miriam's bed-chamber closed upon her sorrow, and she, with the inborn desire of the stricken for darkness and silence, drew the curtains about her grief. So this it was to which the haunting dread of the past weeks had been pointing. For a while the message seemed to hold no meaning for her, but suddenly, as though through parting mists, there dawned upon her stunned mind a vision of her husband fighting hopelessly against the towering grey seas, and in an agony of helpless realization she cowered, moaning and tearless, against the foot-board of her bed. He was gone, swept away from her in a relentless surge to which his great strength was but a laughable thing, and he had died, choking and struggling, while she danced. O God, O God!

The day wore on. Madame, blind with tears, begged pitifully to be admitted, but Miriam was stricken beyond sense of hearing or conscious thought. She crouched like a mesmerised bird before the horror of those heaving seas, that tossing figure, and the sounds of knocking knuckles and pleading voices had become as meaningless to her as the jumbled cries from the street below, until finally Mr. Purling's personal summons

pierced to her shrouded senses and she rose stiffly and unlocked the door. The ship-owner stood on the door-mat, his kindly arms extended. She stared at him blankly, and then pitched forward against his shoulder like a broken toy.

CHAPTER XXII

JAMES PERKINS left the shores of France with fifty English pounds as the sum total of his fortune, after paying the Captain of the "Sun-flower" for his accommodation. With this money, an introduction to Mr. Clark, the Barbadian planter, and a personality as thoroughly divorced from that of Jehu Poole as he could contrive, he purposed to reconstruct his life. Relentlessly he severed every thread of past association, retaining not so much as a garment which could definitely serve to recall to him the thirty-seven years of his previous incarnation.

But it requires more than a new wig and an alteration of attire to change a man's personality. The mind of Jehu Poole persisted in looking out at the world from the body of James Perkins. During the tedious voyage, while he busied himself with the study of sea-lore, memory the trickster launched a continual panorama of recollections across the unoccupied half of his brain; recollections of treasured books, scraps of his own verse, remembrances of faces, voices, scents,

patches of Mother England, which his senses had barely noted at the time of contact, but which now leapt vividly to life. The contracted ship-board existence offered him little distraction from these visions save his new studies and the yarns of the sailors, and he began to discover a curious quality in his mind, for he could absorb a great quantity of information, could even hold technical conversations with the ship's officers, and yet simultaneously follow a constant inward train of thought which had nothing in common with the matter in hand. It seemed almost as though, in drawing about him a second individuality, he had in very fact created for himself a second brain capable of functioning alongside the first. At moments he felt himself to be sailing perilously near to the shores of insanity, and would recall his erring mind with a sharp effort of will. Physically the sea voyage was restoring to him his natural vigour; mentally he was as a man cut in twain, of whom the two halves yet lived and moved independently of each other. They did not come together until, just after sunrise on the thirty-fifth day, he found himself standing on deck gazing over the rippling water of Carlisle Bay to an island oddly green, oddly English in appearance, strangely unlike his preconceived idea of a coral island. The sight of it brought the severed halves of his mind together with a thunder-clap, as there broke upon him the understanding that the interim between death and rebirth was ended; that life, for him, was about to begin again in earnest.

The "Sunflower" came to anchor at her buoy, exchanging salutations in bunting with various sister vessels and the shore, and was immediately surrounded by a bevy of negro boatmen and their craft. The Captain was going ashore at once, and presently Jehu found himself accompanying him in the gig, aware of unexpected elation of spirit as they shot landward through the sparkling beauty of the young day.

The English appearance of the island proved, on closer acquaintance, to be deceptive. Palms began to disentangle themselves from the belt of trees which fringed the shore; gleaming roads of coral dust bordered with tropical foliage became visible, and everywhere about the dock black faces and brilliant garments prevailed. Gangs of slaves were loading and unloading the boats from various ships, and though before long Jehu noted that Bridgetown itself was very much of a dusty replica of some English counterpart, it was soon plain to him that the country had merely drawn a thin veil of England over its tropical vesture, much as he had drawn over his own personality the fictitious one of James Perkins.

As they reached their landing place he noticed among the crowd a man nearly as tall as himself but of slight build and stooping habit, who stood directing the labours of a gang of negroes who were unloading cases of provisions from a boat on to the wharf. When they had stepped ashore the Captain touched him on the sleeve and indicated the tall gentleman.

"That is Mr. Clark," he said. "He is something eccentric. A rich property and in need of a manager if he would but see it; but he prefers to attempt to order the whole business single-handed except for his white foreman and a few clerks."

Jehu regarded the planter attentively. He was richly dressed, and as far as costume was concerned seemed to be totally out of place as an active participator in the dust and turmoil of the quay. About him clung the faded suggestion of a dandiacal past, yet Jehu saw that his slaves obeyed his quietly delivered orders with cheerful alacrity, and that the foreman, who stood at his side checking the goods, appeared to be on a very friendly but decidedly respectful footing with his master.

The Captain, taking Jehu by the elbow, piloted him through the throng and accosted the planter by name. Mr. Clark looked up from a damaged packing case over which he had bent and held out a white slender hand.

"Captain Deal! Well, I am glad to see you safe back again. A prosperous voyage, I hope?"

"Of an average, sir. This gentleman is Mr. Perkins, who has come out from England to present you with an introduction from young Mr. Purling."

Mr. Clark bowed, measuring Jehu's proportions with admiration.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," he said. "East," addressing the foreman, "finish

this matter for me, and be sure to notify the company that at least half a dozen of the cases are unsound. Mr. Perkins, you will honour me at breakfast? Can you join us, Captain?"

"Not to-day, sir."

"Then perhaps you will find time to visit us to-morrow," replied the planter. "Lilywhite," to a huge negro, "see to this gentleman's baggage and have it sent up after us." Nodding goodbye to the seaman he led the way out of the crowd to the spot beneath the shade of some trees where a coach, drawn by a pair of mules and driven by a liveried coloured coachman, awaited him. As they began to thread their course through the concourse of vehicles in the thriving main street of Bridgetown Jehu handed him the letter of introduction. Mr. Clark read it through rapidly, pushed it into his pocket, and leant back luxuriously against the cushions.

"Mr. Perkins," he said, in a slow emphatic voice, "I understand from the words which my friend young Mr. Purling has *not* writ that you have had misfortune in the old country and are come out here to forget it. I have had that experience myself, and therefore I am a man of no curiosity, and my house and what hospitality I have to offer are unreservedly at your disposal. I am a quiet fellow, and follow my own line of life, neither giving nor receiving much entertainment; but if you wish to understand sugar cultivation and refining I do not think that you can find better instructors in Barbadoes than my foreman and myself."

"I thank you with all my heart," answered Jehu, stirred to the quick both by this ready kindness and the man's manner of tendering it. Never, he thought, had he listened to any male voice so attractive as this elderly planter's. It was clear, gently modulated, and its notes resembled those of some deep-toned musical instrument.

Their drive was a long one, beginning with a dazzling road, which at first boasted of a good deal of traffic, for though the first prosperity of the island was on its wane it still flourished exceedingly. But presently they passed from the street of the town to the suburbs, and the houses of the well-to-do merchants, each set in a wealth of growth and colour, a brilliance of light and depth of shade that burst as a revelation upon eyes used to the paler charms of Dorset. From thence they rolled out to a flat country given over to sheets of sugar cane and fields of cotton, and then to a belt of rising ground, one of a series of giant terraces rising to the interior of the island, thickly wooded and filled with countless growths and odours which were novel to Jehu Poole. Passing between stone pillars worthy of some English county mansion the coach ran beneath the shade of a long avenue of cabbage palms, flanked on either hand by a thick undergrowth of shrubs. The drive curved in leisurely fashion, while here and there the shrubbery broke apart to reveal a clearing, and a cluster of negro cabins. Finally the planter's house came into sight, a

wide fronted colonnaded stone building, half hidden among trees and bowered in creepers. To the right of it and joined to it by a low passage a massive squat tower with mere slits of windows glowered like a mediæval fortress in miniature amid a tangle of stephanotis and hibiscus. Noting his guest's look of enquiry, Mr. Clark smiled.

"The hurricane tower, sir," he said. "Let us hope that it will be long before you have occasion to understand its value."

The coach drew up before the colonnade. Stepping stiffly down the planter made Mr. Perkins welcome to Whitestones, and Jehu followed him into the cool dark interior with a strange sensation of sleep-walking, for the place might have been picked up by some giant hand and transported bodily from some placid English park to the tangled tropics. Sun shutters excluded the glare of noon and the polished oaken floors were uncarpeted. The furniture was massive but sparse, as though non-essentials had been discarded in transit, but apart from these details and the presence of black servants and the absence of fireplaces, Jehu could almost have fancied that he had entered the Squire's hall at home.

After pausing for a moment to give directions to the white steward, a bowed elderly man who, so Mr. Clark informed his visitor, had originally accompanied him out from England when he first bought the house and plantation, they passed on

into a vast shadowy dining-room, where, in the twilight caused by closed shutters, there glimmered a ghostly mahogany table draped in fine damask and decked with delicate porcelain and silver for one diner. A second place was quickly laid, and the new friends sat down to a meal which tasted like nectar and ambrosia after the hard fare aboard ship.

Mr. Clark, in his quiet way, was communicative. He was one to whom his trade had become almost a romance, though he had brought to his plantation twenty years ago little save a sore heart and a spirit wearied almost to its core. His visits to England since that date had been very few, the last some five years previously, for all his personal interests centred in Barbadoes. Moreover he was an ardent naturalist, and in the cool of the day took Jehu upon a round of his lovely tangled garden, which was like a personally conducted tour through Fairyland. Late into the warm night they sat together, the planter delighting in a fresh listener, Jehu absorbing the strange lore of plant, bird, beast, and fish, listening with ever increasing enjoyment to the violin-cello voice which recounted these wonders to him. Imperceptibly, although the thought of Miriam's pleasure in all these beauties could she but have shared them with him haunted the background of his mind, the bitterness of his old life faded away from him, and the new came forward, holding out to him the unexpected greeting of friendly hands. Falling asleep between rose-scented linen in an

airy bed-chamber his tired, over-taxed brain at last found rest.

But Miriam Poole, rising to dress in the early daylight of the Downs Farm, had known no such peace, and prayed her daily prayer for death.

CHAPTER XXIII

DOCTOR BODLAMB, sick for sleep and aching in every sixty-four-year-old limb, reeled along an upstair passage of the farmhouse to the bedroom allotted to him and dropped heavily on to his couch. It was five o'clock of a blustering morning in late February, and the wind hurtled wildly against the chimney stacks and down upon the wide hearth, on which, before the leaping blaze of a fire which Lilian herself had carefully kindled, stood a small saucepan of mulled wine, which the Doctor was too tired to touch. He lay as he had dropped, with closed eyelids.

Presently the door opened silently and Lilian, more gnome-like than ever, flitted softly in. The Doctor opened his eyes wearily and moved as though to rise, but she checked him with a gesture, filled a glass from the steaming concoction on the hearth, and brought it to his bedside.

“ Thowt ez mebbe thee'd be asleep, zo I didn' knock,” she explained. “ Do 'ee drink it, zur. Thee be vair spent.”

“ You're a good soul, Mrs. Lilian,” he said, gratefully. “ A pity 'tis a girl.”

“ Umph ! ”

“ You do not think so ? ”

“ No, I don’t. Poole’s enow in th’ world a’ready, but this’n can change her naame zome day, and the luck wi’t, I’m hopen. Now go ‘ee t’ zleep, zur, and zleep zound. Her’m arl right zo vur ez us can tell, but ef thee’m wanted us’ll carl’ee.” She threw another log on the fire and vanished amid the leaping shadows. Doctor Bodlamb, warmed and comforted, dropped off at once into a deep slumber. He had fought with every crude weapon in his power for the salvation of two lives, one at least of which had no vital wish to continue in existence, and his victory had been dearly bought. Never, within his memory, had he felt so utterly weary, so nearly beaten.

In the sick-room also sleep held merciful sway. Beside the bed whereon Jehu had first seen the light a red-faced, placid country woman, the Doctor’s right hand in such cases, sat sewing in the attempt to keep herself awake. To her came old Lilian.

“ Be her zaafe, does’ee think ? ” she asked in a whisper, nodding at the head lying low on a single pillow.

“ Us do think ez her be,” whispered back the nurse, “ but ‘twuz turble hard, zo ‘twuz.”

“ Then I’ll tak’ on and watch a while ef thee’ll rest,” said Lilian. “ Give I the physic and gruel and ef zo be ez thee’m needed I’ll carl to ‘ee.”

“ Thank’ee,” replied the woman, rising. “ I do own ez I be bone weary. Thee’ll find the

gruel on the hob, and thik's th' medicine." She gathered together her belongings and left the old lady alone with the patient.

Near the fire stood a large wooden cradle, in which Jehu had once lain. In it slept Jehu's daughter, a shrimp of a creature, with all the ugliness of crudity and the appeal of helplessness upon her. From the top of her strawberry coloured poll rose a single elf-lock of black hair. Her eyes were tight shut beneath bulging lids, painfully prominent in her wizen face. Lilian bent over the cradle studying the child intently.

"No uglier than he were when he were barned, arl th' zame," she muttered, defiantly, as though in reply to some verbal criticism. "Her may be a beauty yet, ye never knows." Turning away she approached the bed and surveyed Miriam's worn visage with equal attention.

"Poor zoul," she commented. "Mebbe ef Doctor hed a knowed what I knows he'd a let thee zlip awaay." She drew up a chair and seated herself for her watch.

A pale sun rose warily behind racing clouds. Through shutter and curtain came on the wind faint sounds of farmyard life, clinking pails and banging doors. Miriam slept on, utterly exhausted. The child cried, stirring feebly, was fed with gruel, slept, woke again, and was sick. Still Miriam slept, and Lilian, doubtful of what she ought to do, opened the door and roused the nurse in the room opposite. Leaving her in charge of the baby she went downstairs to her housekeeping.

At noon came William Quent, as also the Squire, with gifts and enquiries. William lingered when the Squire had gone, and cross-questioned the doctor.

"Be her in much danger?" he asked, anxiously.

"No, not now, but of course there will be some for a few days yet," replied Doctor Bodlamb. "I believe that she will pull safe through. Dinnot fret man, I know what's in your heart."

"There's a many things there, zur, and I be selfish. Ef I were to lose em both, him and her too, I'd have to maake shift to foller 'em." He fidgeted for a moment, then added, hesitatingly: "I've aheard from Lunnon, Doctor. Young Maister Purling wants to coom up and bide wi' I presently, when she'm herself again. He zays ez he've agot business t'zee about wi' her. Whaat does 'ee think o' that? Ztraight, now, whaat does 'ee think of Maister Purling?"

The Doctor flushed to the roots of his grey hair.

"You called yourself selfish just now, my friend," he said, "but let me tell you that were you a hundred times as selfish as you think you are you would yet be a child in selfishness compared with that man. He lived under my roof for close on a year and gave me ample opportunity to study his character, and I consider him to be one of the most ingeniously selfish creatures that I have ever met. It is really marvellous how he contrives to obtain what he wants."

"He wants oor Mrs. Miriam, zur."

"Eh, what, man?"

"He allus did. I zeed through'n, but them days he weren't zertain ez he wouldn' hev to lose zummat to get her. Zo he let her go, and Jehu had her. Now he'm coomen back vor to try again."

"Keep him away, man; keep him away."

"How be I to do thik? Ef he dinnot coom to I he'll bide at an inn, and then, mebbe, I couldn' look arter'n zo close."

Doctor Bodlamb sat down and laughed.

"Well thought, sir!" he exclaimed. "Well thought! Now let me give you a word of advice. Put off this fellow as long as you can, and meanwhile as soon as our lady is up and about persuade her to marry you. It is good for neither her nor the child to live alone here with no other companion than old Lilian, and on my honour, Quent, Poole himself would not grudge her to you now. She is not fit to stand alone, and there'll be others beside this Mr. Robert after her avore long, now that she has inherited a tidy bit of money."

"I'm not vitted vor her, zur. Books, zo to zpik, b'ain't in my line."

"Let her keep her books and her memories, William; she does not want a second Jehu, even if she could find him. You and I know that for her there can be but the one. But she does need a protector and a father for the child, and I tell you, my modest friend, that there is no man in the world better fitted for that task than yourself, as Poole himself showed when he left her affairs

in your keeping. I believe that she herself will see that."

"I hope zo, zur," said William, doubtfully.

Quent took his leave, and the Doctor, satisfied with his patient's progress, shortly after set out for his own house. The wind had fallen and the countryside gleamed beneath a watery sun. Miriam, as she lay flat in bed, could see through the lattice a swaying lace-work of swelling buds against a stormy sky, and she stared at them as though never before had she seen such buds or such clouds. Cloud and gleam, gleam and cloud, swinging buds, and the cessation of unimaginable pain, they were all mingled inextricably together. From time to time they brought her the child. She looked at it dully, fed it mechanically, and sank back into that indescribable rest.

At the end of a week Doctor Bodlamb, rubbing his hands delightedly, announced to William Quent that their patient was safely round the corner and progressing far better than he had expected. At the end of a month, Miriam, carried down into the parlour, found William awaiting her in his best suit, and from that time onward he became the fixed centre of her landscape, steadfast, attentive, patient, slightly absurd. At times she wearied of him, but by degrees she came, unconsciously, to regard him as an inevitable background to her daily life. It was obvious that sooner or later he intended to propose marriage, and had her child been a boy, she told herself, her answer would have been in the affirmative. But a girl was another matter, for she could safely

grow up under a mother's care only, and Miriam shrank from the thought of another match. Nevertheless, in her present state of weakness and isolation, she could not bring herself to repel her old friend's gentle advances. His all-pervading attention lent her a sense of security, of refuge from the contemplation of her own loneliness; for Miriam's sense of maternity developed slowly. To Jehu had been given all that she had of passion, and, it almost seemed, of tenderness, so that even to his child she had at first little to offer for its own sake, until, one Spring day, there passed over the infant's plain face a fleeting likeness to her father. Thenceforward Miriam watched eagerly for the likeness to return and develop, and the child herself, as though in response to some needed ray of warmth, began to grow and thrive with unexpected vigour. Tentatively Miriam drew her newly discovered treasure into the recesses of her heart, turning it about and about in her thoughts until she almost forgot the ubiquitous William. Her life no longer stood still, but began once again to revolve, slowly but with increasing speed, around the dark-eyed solemn baby.

Robert Purling, however, fulfilled his purpose and came to Dorchester, with the daffodils, as the guest of William Quent. Miriam received him coldly. She had seen him last shortly after her husband's death, and with the pain of the interview there had mingled, on her part, an odd feeling of distrust. He had been gentle, kind, all that he should have been to the widow of a friend

whom he had valued, but his grief had not rung true, and he had seemed to her but the pitiful ghost of a past delusion which yet had force enough to hurt through the agony of her greater loss. She had no wish to see more of him, and his pretext of a visit to discuss the printer Murth's offers with regard to her husband's posthumous publication struck her as thin. He had the air of a hunter patiently chasing down some quarry, and instinct warned her that she herself was the quarry in question. Well, let him hunt! He had lost all chance of success long before, when by faint slight and delicate innuendo he had tried to belittle Jehu in her eyes. She took refuge behind the barrier of her motherhood and surveyed him composedly over the black-elf lock of Jehu's daughter.

Robert began his sojourn in the country with a week beneath the roof of William Quent. Observing then, to his surprise, that he had a rival in the person of the stout countryman, he removed, with unruffled politeness, to the inn, which offered to him the double advantages of deliverance from an over-charged atmosphere and a period of hospitality limited only by his inclination. Followed a silent duel of wills which, under happier circumstances, would have afforded Miriam a good deal of amusement. Quent invariably stood on the defensive, parrying his opponent's lightning thrusts with stolid calm. His ubiquity and immovability began, at last, to make Robert feel light-headed. Insensibly Miriam, well aware of the spiritual strife

which waged about her, crept closer under the comfortable shadow of William. She knew that, if put to it, she inherited enough of her mother's spirit to fight most of her battles single-handed, but she wearied of perpetually kicking against the pricks, and before the calculating passion of Robert Purling his rival shone with homely steadfastness. Jehu had loved Quent as he loved no other man, and her heart grew warm towards him.

There came a day at length when Robert walked into Miriam's sunlit parlour and found her alone. It was one of those Spring days out of whose radiant skies any incredible benediction may fall, so full are they of promise and life. A parcel had just arrived for Miriam from London, a parcel from Murth, who, deeply impressed by Jehu in life and by the tragic manner of his death, had spared no pains in selling his book. It had been well received and already Miriam had reaped the benefit in the form of a generous royalty. To-day Murth had written to report a steady increase of sale and to send her a present of the latest work from his press, the momentary talk of the town, and a book, so he ventured to believe, that would have appealed strongly to Mr. Poole himself. Miriam sat, at the instant of Robert's arrival, with the uncut volume on her lap, her face alight with something of her old animation. For once, under the influence of the glow which had come to her in Murth's kindly thought for her, she discarded the set reserve with which she habitually favoured Robert.

"See, Mr. Robert," she exclaimed, holding up the book for his inspection, "what Mr. Murth has sent me."

He came to her side and took the work from her hand.

"Ah," he said, reading the title, "Murth pays you the deserved compliment of sending you nought but the best. Mrs. Miriam, I would that I had the same to offer you."

She was silent, her face darkening.

"You must know of my devoted love for you," he said, gravely, seating himself beside her on the couch and resting his hand on her's. "It has been yours for the past five years."

"I regret it, sir," she replied, coldly, drawing further away.

"Mistress, you must have pity upon me," he continued, quietly, watching every shade of expression which passed over her features. "I have waited as patiently as I could compass, but I know that I lost you once through my own folly, and I dare not risk that again, though no doubt I am speaking sooner than I ought. Would you not have taken me if I had spoken five years ago, Miriam?"

"A woman may indeed mistake gilding for gold before she finds the true metal," said Miriam.

"Then you account me base coin?"

She struggled to meet his gaze. "You have not rung true, sir," she replied, distressedly.

He noted her trouble, knew that he had touched

a chord of pity, and pressed his advantage. He had at least a memory of passion within her as an ally, and it was inconceivable that such a woman could contentedly end her days as the wife of William Quent. For a mad second the desire to capture her by main force almost overcame him, but commonsense warned him that in that wise had Jehu won her, and that no other man could safely repeat the experiment. Not violence but intensity of appeal might gain the day.

He slipped suddenly to his knees at her feet, and as she drew sharply away seized hungrily on the hem of her dress.

“Miriam,” he whispered. “O Miriam!”

She looked down into his white passionate face, and recoiled yet further, penned against the back of the couch.

“I know, I know,” he protested rapidly; “you lost your all with Poole, but he was too great a soul to grudge me your kindness, one who loved you before himself. Give me what you can. I am not easily moved to love or hate, and therefore when I love or hate I do so more deeply than other men. Take me out of your pity and your memory, dear love; give me what you can, and you shall have in return a love that will never ring false again.”

What spirit of cunning wisdom prompted him to that admission of past insincerity? There are few natural-hearted women who can listen unmoved to a lover’s confession of fault. Miriam was stirred as she had never thought to be

stirred again and could find no immediate word of dismissal.

“Miriam,” he repeated. “Look at me. I ring true!”

What guardian spirit, watching over Jehu’s wife, provoked him to that rash challenge? She looked him full in the eyes, and behind their burning blue there glimmered for one fleeting second the flickering light of a fearful conscience; a memory of knowledge withheld, of scruples thrust aside. Like a bell there rang suddenly through her soul a signal of fear.

“No,” she cried, trying to rise. “I cannot, Mr. Robert. Jehu . . . No, I could never marry you. . . . I am sorry from my heart. Let me go!”

He made no other reply than to cling madly to her dress, white-hot with anger and passion, speechless for the nonce with the force of his own emotion. The wild terror of a trapped creature came upon her. Wrenching vainly at her dress she struck him blindly, and broke away as he reeled sideways against the edge of her work-stand. When he had recovered his balance she was gone, and a slight trickle of blood was running down the cheek which had struck on the stand.

He laid a hand on the couch, steadied himself, and rose giddily. Groping, he found his hat and cane and left the house.

She had struck him, and the blow had raised within him a veritable demon of fury. Silently he vowed that, if he were baulked himself, no

other man, above all no William Quent, should win her. If the worst came to the worst not one weapon, however base, would he scruple to use against her. With bent head and raging heart he tramped along the six miles to Dorchester.

CHAPTER XXIV

DAVID DANE walked the streets with renewed vigour. By some Providential agency his path had been cleared of its difficulties and he could now live and breathe in freedom from the ever increasing suspense which had come to torment his days. Mr. Mole, for some undiscoverable reason, had vanished from the immediate face of the earth, and with him had departed the bulk of his indebtedness. Jehu Poole was drowned, and Mrs. Miriam had apparently forgotten the balance of his debt still owing; at any rate she had flown homeward without so much as leaving a hint behind her. He was, to all intents and purposes, free, although the pleasure of his freedom was marred by the unpleasant consideration of its cost.

However, regrets could not resurrect Jehu Poole, and David wasted no energy in vain lamentation. He applied himself instead to a course of reformation which deeply impressed Mr. Purling with his charge's unexpected goodness of heart, and which, in addition, perceptibly loosened the shipowner's purse-strings. David's sky became cloudless, wherefore the shock was

all the greater when trouble walked into the house in the person of Robert Purling.

Robert was back from Dorchester. He paid his respects to his uncle, and begged the release of David from his duties in the library in order that he might accompany him home to dine. The invitation was such an unexpected piece of condescension on Robert's part that David's breath was almost taken away, but Mr. Purling, well pleased, gave the desired leave, and David departed forthwith beside the gentleman of leisure.

Not until they had demolished an excellent little dinner à deux and had reached the port wine stage of satisfaction did Robert drop his thunderbolt on David's slightly bemused head. He had put him through his paces very prettily, had fathomed the shallow deeps of his brain and the extent of his capacity for liquor, and had fully discovered the craven who lived beneath a juvenile swagger. He timed his blow to a nicety, choosing the exact moment when rich food and a fair quantity of old wine had produced in David a peaceful yet easily startled frame of mind, a state so entirely removed from unpleasant anticipation that any small explosion becomes as startling to it as an earthquake.

"How much did you owe to John Mole?" he said, lifting the decanter as he spoke.

There was no reply. Looking across the mahogany he saw that David's jaw had dropped and that he was staring at him like a mesmerized rabbit.

"Come!" said Robert, smiling. "You need not be so dismayed. It was not much, I'll be bound."

"How did you know that I owed him ought? I did not know that you knew him."

"Ah, I have had occasion to be interested in him, David, and a very few enquiries revealed to me that most of the 'prentices of his district were in his debt, and that you yourself were about there pretty frequently. Never mind. Men like ourselves know better than to speak of *all* our acquaintance, eh?"

"Why," said David, recovering himself a little, "that's so, but *he* is gone, at any rate."

"Poole likewise," said Robert softly and sadly.

David grew pale, and seemed to be uncertain as to whether he ought to sigh or smile. He combined both in an effort at the reconciliation of opposites.

"What did you still owe Poole, David?" continued Robert.

"How do you know that I was in his debt?"

"You forget, my lad. I come fresh from Dorchester."

"Mrs. Miriam would not have told you."

"You think not?"

David licked dry lips and sipped his wine genteelly.

"There is no trusting a woman!" he said bitterly.

Robert smiled with satisfaction. He had acquired his knowledge of David's indebtedness to

Jehu by the merest chance, through an unintentional piece of eavesdropping, when William Quent and Miriam were employed in clearing up the last of Jehu's personal accounts, a task which she had shirked and long delayed. Coming quietly into the room Robert had heard Quent laugh unexpectedly, and then Miriam, leaning over his shoulder with her back to Robert, had laughed faintly also.

"We will burn that," she had said, taking something from William's hand and shredding it into tiny fragments, "Jehu'd have me forgive the foolish lad the rest of his debt, I'll swear. 'Tis a pity that good Mr. Purling should have the care of a petty Mohock."

"'Tez a pity, mistress, ez thik petty Mohock, ez thee do carl'n, should be zaved vrum larnen' his praper lesson by such kind-hearted volks ez our Jehu," William had replied. "How's'ever, ef thee waants'n vorgive us'll let'n be."

Robert smiled again at the recollection, and pushed the decanter across to David.

"I will be frank with you," he said kindly. "Mistress Poole did not divulge your secret; indeed from what I chanced to hear in quite another quarter, I gathered that you had been released from the bulk of your debt as payment for holding your peace about a certain matter vital to our dead friend."

David, who was feeling very uncertain of his whereabouts, looked puzzled, and refused the wine.

"I take it," said his host, leaning over the

table, "that you, David, understand that there was a connection between our friend's sad death and the disappearance of your other debtor."

David's face presented a study in bewilderment, but he was vaguely conscious that any denial of knowledge might plunge him back into his former straits, so he held his tongue and only stared helplessly at his tormentor.

"Sometimes," pursued Robert calmly, "there are inconvenient witnesses to a crime. They are paid off and keep their own counsel. Mayhap the payer comes to grief, and that there are those after his death who scent blackmail. The silent witness wisely disappears. Eh?"

David was holding on to the under edge of the table, which had begun to sway curiously before his eyes. He made an incoherent sound.

"Sometimes," repeated Robert, "there is, so to speak, another witness to the first witness, who knows by chance what the other knows, but was not an eye-witness to the crime itself. Say that he comes by his knowledge when half-way through the payment of a debt to the criminal. Is it not probable that the criminal should release him from further payment, even if he does not actually offer him money as an inducement to silence?"

"Yes," said David, utterly befogged.

"Well, then," rapped out Robert sharply, "you admit that you knew Mole to be a witness to the fact that Jehu Poole murdered Mr. McQueen the excise man, Mrs. Miriam's adopted father, because he had just discovered the girl to

be Poole's own niece, through his father's first marriage in France, and Poole desired to marry her."

"O good gracious me, no!" cried David, starting to his feet and swaying uncertainly in the glow of the candles. "Whatever are you saying, Mr. Robert?"

"The truth, young man. Now sit down, and I beg of you not to upset that candlestick," said Robert, removing one of his small candelabra out of harm's way. "I only tell you that you may know that I know the facts. Now, Poole was my intimate friend, and at all costs I wish to ensure absolute silence on your part, both out of consideration for his memory and for the sake of his innocent wife and child. Whatever he may have done you and I have found him goodness itself. Is not that so, David?"

"Why, yes," said David, dizzily, "but

"No need to enlarge upon the affair, my lad," said Robert, gravely. "'Tis over and done. Mrs. Miriam knows nothing; my knowledge does not come from that source, and the point is that she desires me to collect the balance of your debt for her. Now I, knowing the facts, am desirous of paying it for you without her knowledge, handing you the money here and now to forward on to her as coming from yourself, if you will renew your promise to keep silence on this terrible secret, and will sign a statement to that effect."

"But indeed I never knew ought about it!"

protested David desperately, peering at Robert's face through a whirling mist of candles and glasses. "You are mistook, indeed you are!"

"There is no need to lie to me, sir," said Robert sternly. "The least said soonest mended. Sign this now, and we'll never breathe a word of it again."

Out of the mist a blurred paper and ink materialized before David. A hand, firmly clasping his own, guided an errant pen while the unwilling writer protested feebly. Then paper, ink, pen, vanished into the limbo from whence they came. Somebody began to weep hysterically and to declare that this was more than a joke. Something cool—the surface of a polished dining-table—touched a heated forehead. Something else upset. Sleep.

Robert Purling wiped his brow, and watched his slumbering guest narrowly.

"Witness number two," he muttered. "First Andrew Prowse, the lad that found McQueen. Lucky I fell in with him and his suspicions. Second, this charming youth. Third, though quite unconsciously, William Quent. None of 'em the least use in a court of law, but all quite good enough for my purpose. Gad, what a blackguard I am become!"

CHAPTER XXV

MONSIEUR DE NIVERS was dead. They had put him, with his rouge and his curled wig, according to the directions of his Will, into a ponderous coffin and afforded him such honour as could be given by funeral dignities. Madame had temporarily closed up the house in Pall Mall and returned to Lyons to settle up the last of her husband's affairs. From thence she returned in October, plumper and handsomer than ever in her weeds and with a pair of bright eyes attentively turned in the direction of the senior Purling.

In the midst of an Indian summer, mellow and thunderous, Miriam received from her a pressing invitation to leave the Downs farmstead and its memories and to make the house in Pall Mall, for a while at least, the headquarters for herself and her child.

Old Lilian warmly supported the suggestion.

“Tell 'ee the trewth, my lass,” she said feelingly, “I be vair achin' vor Branscombe's cottage and a patch of me own avore I puts in my

claim to six voot o' churchyard. It bain't that I dinnot like 'ee, but us two bain't o' the zame clay, and I cannot do 'ee the good I'd wish. I gets a veelin', whiles, that the chaney vase be like to jar the clay pot to pieces. Thee'd be better zet on a Lunnon mantelshelf than goin' back and forth at the well here."

That evening, alone in Jehu's untouched study, the hundred scattered suspicions which had haunted Miriam's mind since her last interview with Robert Purling crystallised into a definite conviction and decided her course of action. Robert had always desired her; had missed her by a hair's breadth, and in his single flash of passion had displayed the untold possibilities of his soul. She had for the fraction of a second looked through his unguarded eyes into the depths behind them, and she had seen much. He had not loved Jehu, and he had been alone with him in that boat. . . .

There was no portrait of her husband in the house, but she reached down his fiddle from its case and caressed it tenderly.

"Jehu," she whispered across the silent strings, "if he so much as helped thee to thy death I'll never rest until I know it and have exposed him. . . . Jehu, I have promised to marry Will . . . but there is no man like thee, nor ever can be. All the rest are so small. . . ."

Floating ghostwise along the room she seemed to hear the echo of a tune, played vauntingly,

gaily, by a musician who tramped to and fro from closed door to curtained window.

“ You meaner beauties of the night
That poorly satisfy our eyes. . . .”

The widow of Jehu Poole laid back the instrument in its case. She had no further need of tears, but of action.

Three days after her arrival in town she received an unexpected caller in the person of David Dane. The maid who brought word of his coming further stated that the young gentleman seemed to be agitated and desired a private interview. The footman had conducted him to a back room where he awaited her. Speculating with some amusement as to the probable nature of his business she left her child to see him.

David was dangling miserably about the apartment when she came to him, and her first impression was of red-rimmed eyes and such thin sunken cheeks, that she imagined him to be going into a decline. She was not reassured by his manner, for the instant the door closed upon them the young man collapsed on to a chair and fell to weeping incontinently. She stood watching him in amazement.

“ Why, lad! ” she exclaimed sharply, “ what ails you? ”

“ Mistress Poole! ” he wailed, “ I am well-nigh distracted, but I dared not come to see you sooner for fear of meeting with Mr. Robert. I believe that except for him I am the most wicked man alive! ”

“What nonsense!”

“No, it is true. I must tell you, for I cannot sleep at nights for thinking of it, though I cannot remember it aright. O wait for a moment, mistress! Truly I am no madman! Do not leave me until I have told you!”

She approached him cautiously.

“Come, ye foolish fellow,” she adjured him, “pull yourself together and talk sense! Ye’re in trouble again?”

He raised his blurred face.

“ ‘Twas all through Mr. Robert,” he said, unsteadily. “For some reason he seems to be your enemy, and he has tricked me into claiming to have witnessed I know not what. Four months ago, just after he came back from Dorsetshire, he took me to dine alone with him at his house, and after he had made me drunk, he made me sign some paper about Mr. Poole having killed your uncle, and I know not what horrible thing beside. I am almost mad with trying to remember what it was, but I did not wake up until the day after and Mr. Robert threatened me with jail and worse if I troubled him or spoke of it to anyone. I had never dared to tell you but that I have been with Mr. Purling’s housekeeper to hear the new preachers at Hackney Fields, and they preached . . . they preached. . . .” overcome with the vividness of the recollection he wept afresh.

“He accuses my husband of murdering my Uncle McQueen!” cried Miriam.

"Yes, and there was some other matter too, the reason for his killing him, so Mr. Robert said, but I have forgot nearly all save that he forced me into signing some false statement. He thought me fool enough to be kept quiet by fear, but I had rather be in fear of him than of hell-fire!"

"You did not believe that my husband could be guilty of this?"

"No, no, no! If Mr. Robert had need to find false witnesses the accusation must be false. But what can we do? If you betray me to him he can do me grievous harm."

Miriam, white and perplexed, was silent for a second, thinking. So this was to be Robert's revenge, and Jehu, being dead, could never make answer to the cruel lie. David, looking up at her, saw with dread the fierce anger of her expression and cowered helplessly before her.

"You did right to speak to me," she said presently, "but we cannot do anything until he openly attacks my husband's memory. You are a fool, David, but since you have striven to set your wrong right, I must try to expose him without harming you, and you had better go at once, for he will be here this afternoon."

Nothing loath David departed hurriedly, and Miriam climbed slowly back to her child's nursery, lost in thought.

Later, obliged by courtesy to receive Mme. de Nivers' guests, she met with Robert, who was safely surrounded by an unconscious bodyguard

of decent and lugubrious gentlemen. He bowed over her hand and then lightly touched his cheek.

"The wound has healed, madam," he said, courteously.

"That I am glad to hear," she replied perforce, and the subtlety of their aside was lost in the general conversation, under cover of which he moved away, for Robert was walking warily although he greatly desired an entirely private conversation with Miriam Poole. The day following brought him the opportunity, and Miriam, withdrawn into the privacy of the back sitting-room where she had interviewed David Dane, looked up from her needlework to behold him entering quietly unannounced. For a breath the blood drained painfully to her heart, then, laying aside her work, she braced herself for the dawning conflict.

"You must pardon me, mistress," he said, coming to her side, "but I am obliged to force my distasteful conversation upon you for the nonce."

"You may say to me what you will, sir," she replied coldly. "I am ready to listen to you if you do not intend to press me for an answer to your proposals which you know that I cannot give."

He drew up a chair and seated himself uninvited.

"Mrs. Miriam," he said, smoothing his cuff-frill attentively, "it is often not so easy as we imagine to know which things we cannot do at

a pinch, and which answers we positively cannot give to the vital questions of life. Circumstances may so change one's outlook that the impossibility of yesterday may become the necessity of to-day."

"There is no necessity," she answered defiantly, "which can force an honest woman into making an evil match."

"Certainly not," he agreed politely, "an *evil* match is far from my thoughts for you. On the contrary by the far the best thing which you could do in the cause of righteousness would be to consider my proposal afresh in the new light in which I am about to present it to you. Nay, mistress, hear me out, as you value your dead husband's good name!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Carry back your mind, dear lady, to the year of your marriage; no, further back than that, to the night of your uncle's death. Who killed him?"

She caught her breath; the challenge was out.

"Anyone among fifty who owed him hatred," she replied.

Robert leant forward, bringing his face close to hers.

"Jehu Poole!" he said, softly.

She recoiled from him violently, leaping from her chair to confront him.

"You liar, you liar!" she cried, "liar, liar, liar!"

"No liar, Miriam. I have known of this all

along, and your husband knew me to be aware of it, for I came by accident upon the proofs of his guilt, and he preferred death to dishonour; indeed his death has been the price which he was willing to pay for your protection."

" You murdered him, drowned him at sea, and now you come to me with lies. You have no evidence."

" I repeat that I tell you the truth. Wait. I am a desperate man, driven crazy with my love for you, and therefore I am base enough to play this card against you. I can produce my evidence for you alone and then destroy it if you will pledge yourself to me, trusting to your integrity not to go back on the bargain as I would trust no other living man or woman, or else I will produce it in open court. The choice rests with you. I have sound witnesses to the truth of my accusation."

" Show me your evidence!"

" In a minute, but first it may carry weight in your decision if you know that your accusation to me of murdering Poole is groundless and that he is still alive, and, if need be, within reach of the law of England."

She stood, frozen, behind her chair.

" Jehu Poole is alive," he repeated, " and at this moment he is in the Barbadoes, having left you and feigned to die that he might escape the law which would have condemned him on two counts; first upon that of having murdered Mr. McQueen, secondly on that of having wittingly

married you, his own niece. There is an uglier name than murder for that second crime."

"I his niece!"

"His niece. Your father was Nichol McQueen, your mother Mlle. Sylvie de Lomagne, so-called. Her mother was the first wife of Mr. Oliver Poole, Jehu's father, and sister to M. Lukis de Lomagne of Lyons. Oliver Poole deserted his wife, and at her death her brother, M. de Lomagne, adopted your mother as his own child, giving her his own name. The papers proving this relationship between you and Jehu came by chance into the hands of your uncle, who until then had been ignorant of it. He informed Jehu of the facts and agreed to call upon him at the farm that night in order to show him the proofs. Jehu, who was in love with you and determined to marry you at all costs, shot him close by the farm, having laid in wait for him after leaving the inn, and robbed the body of the papers. It chanced that there were witnesses of the crime who held their peace at the time because they had no love for Mr. McQueen and no grudge against Jehu, but I discovered them by chance, and when Poole knew that his secret must out he threw himself upon my mercy. Together we contrived that he should seem to die, and with my aid he escaped to Barbadoes, where he is now with a sugar-grower named Clark to whom I gave him an introduction. You poor soul, are neither lawful wife nor—forgive me—lawful mother."

"He is alive!"

For the moment the rest of Robert's speech, the hideousness of his accusation, were dwarfed by the one stupendous fact. She stared at his white face which shone oddly luminous to her gaze through the folds of a grey mist. All sound died from her ears, and in a great stillness she stood looking upon him. Then normal sight, sound, comprehension, rushed back to her, and with them the memory of Madame de Nivers' voice recounting to her the history of her mother's marriage.

"I am not Jehu's niece!" declared Miriam Poole.

"Your pardon, I have proof."

"You cannot have proof. My mother was own daughter to M. de Lomagne. His adopted daughter, whom you think to have been my mother, is living now, a Benedictine nun at Fontevrault. Madame de Nivers was my mother's dear friend and knew both Sylvies. She has told me all about them, and before she returned from this last journey to France she visited my mother's cousin in her convent and brought me the message of her love and blessing. You are utterly mistaken; no, I see in your face that you knew, and have tried to deceive me!"

"Fontevrault!" The word broke from him like an anathema.

"Yes, she is at Fontevrault. If you choose, you can see her at any time. What have you done to drive Jehu from me?"

"I did nothing, you have heard the truth. He

thought himself to be your uncle, yet he determined to wed you, so he killed McQueen, and when he knew himself to be in danger of discovery he came to me, and out of pity for him and love for you, I assisted him to feign death and escape."

"I believe no word of what you say, Mr. Robert. Jehu would never stoop to do me such a villainous wrong. Show me your witnesses!"

"My witnesses are Andrew Prowse who found the body and saw much that he then kept to himself, and David Dane, who was entangled in the money-lending nets of a man named Mole, who is wanted for the killing of Jem Heal. Mole was a witness of the crime, and through him David learnt the truth, he of all people, but held his peace in gratitude for your—for Poole's rescuing him from his difficulties. Mole is fled abroad, but David's witness remains."

Miriam looked at him immovably, then, without lowering her eyes, she laughed triumphantly.

"Ah, now I understand!" she cried. "My uncle's murderer found the papers, which misled you all, on his dead body. After our marriage he blackmailed Jehu, who, trusting in your honour, came to you for help in leaving me that my name should not suffer. You now blacken him in order to force me into marriage with you. You fool, you fool! What think you of this? Your fine witness, David Dane, being in deadly fear of the fires of hell after listening to the preachers in Hackney Fields, told me the truth

of how you obtained his witness to things which he had never known of and did not believe. As for the lad, Andrew Prowse; he means no harm I'll be bound, but I know him well, and though he is a good groom he is a poor witness, for he is something weak in the intellect and can be made to recall things which he never saw, and to believe anything which so clever a villain as yourself chose to suggest to his imagination. Your evidence is worthless."

He stood dumfounded. The only proof which might have carried weight with her, his own hasty transcript of the papers which Jehu had insisted on destroying before he left France, was worthless before the living testimony of Madame de Nivers and the Benedictine. In a court of law his flimsily manufactured evidences would be instantly torn into shreds, and at the most he could do no more than cast a faint cloud of suspicion over the name of Poole at the cost of publicly blackening and condemning himself. Never had he been so great a fool as when he sought to use so pliable a tool as David Dane with which to carry out his deception.

"Show me your written evidence!" she repeated, challenging him afresh.

"Here are the copies of the documents which were in Poole's possession," he said, controlling himself with an effort. "The originals were those taken from your uncle's body, and were brought to me by Poole when he sought for my aid."

"Where are they now?"

"They were destroyed by Poole himself."

"And yet he suffered you to make these! You copied them without his knowledge or consent. My husband is alive, and he shall come back to clear himself and learn of his mistake."

Robert licked dry lips but could find no words with which to break the silence as she waited for him to reply. High heels clicked in the passage without, and the door opened to admit Madame de Nivers. Simultaneously the combatants wheeled about to meet her.

"Ah la la!" exclaimed the little French-woman, halting on the threshold and then advancing slowly. "What happens? You quarrel, you two?"

"Madame," said Miriam, trembling with the reaction of her defiance, "would you please to tell this—gentleman—about my mother and her cousin the adopted daughter of M. de Lomagne?"

"Sylvie and Sylvette? But yes. Your mother, Mlle. de Lomagne, was my friend of childhood. Her cousin was the daughter of M. de Lomagne's only sister who ran away with some Englishman whose name I do not t'ink I ever did hear. When his sister die M. de Lomagne adopt her little one and give her his name, and we call her, Sylvette to distinguish between her and his own daughter. I was but a child myself, but I do recall the day on which she came to them, for I was staying in their house at Lyons. Before your mother run away, like

her aunt, with an Englishman, your father, Sylvette did join the order of S. Benedict and was sent to Fontevrault. Your mother die at Marseilles after your father, when you were a child of ten years, and your uncle, M. McQueen, came over from England and took you away to himself to bring you up. Why does M. Robert desire to know all this?"

"Madame, M. Robert would have me believe that my mother was not Mlle. Sylvie, but Mlle. Sylvette, and that I am not Jehu's wife but his niece."

"O mon Dieu, what ugly mistake! No, no, Sylvette never did marry, and is in her convent till this day, for I did visit her not a month ago and bring a message from her to Madame Poole."

"Jehu believed in the mistake. He is alive, madame, in the Barbadoes, where he has gone to save my honour. Mr. Robert copied the papers that deceived him and has brought me the copies. The originals Jehu destroyed. They were taken from my uncle's body, and Mr. Robert would have me believe that Jehu murdered him to obtain them, in order that he might marry me in my ignorance. Mr. Robert says that when Jehu found that there were witnesses to the crime he came to him for help, and fled with Mr. Roberts' aid, but these are the witnesses."

Trembling with passion she poured out her account of his attempt upon her husband's honour and the means which he had used in doing

so. Madame de Nivers, backing swiftly, locked the door.

"Monsieur," she said suavely, "clear yourself of these accusations, I beg of you!"

"I believed my statements to be true," he persisted steadily.

"Ah, not so, for you have bribed witness!" retorted Madame. "Monsieur, you shall not leave this room until you do recant, take back your false words, and if you do try to touch us, we scream together and your wickedness shall be publish through this house!"

"I have been mistaken!" he hedged, glancing helplessly at the key in her fingers.

"Mistaken! Shall we call it that, Mistress Poole, or do you wish him to be expose?"

Miriam covered her face desperately.

"Make him to clear Jehu's name," she said at length. "And then let us save the scandal, for always there will be those who desire to believe evil of a good man."

"You are wise, my dear. M. Robert, how did M. Poole obtain these papers?"

"I have told you. He shot McQueen."

"Nay, nay, we do not believe. You blackmail, you bribe, you deceive, you make a foolish lad drunk that you may obtain your witnesses. The truth, monsieur, the truth, or we publish your evil upon the housetop!"

Robert moved a pace toward the door, turned back, hesitated, capitulated. Ignoring Madame de Nivers, he strode across the room to the spot

where Miriam had sunk down. He knelt before her, raising the hem of her dress to his lips as he had done on that memorable morning in the farmhouse parlour.

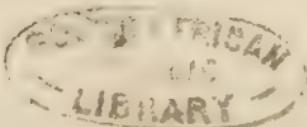
“ Stephen King and Jem Heal murdered your uncle, Miriam,” he said. “ They strove to blackmail Jehu through John Mole. He turned the tables upon them, and having removed the danger from your path he went to Barbadoes with my help. But I pledge you my honour—yes, there is still a little of it left—that never until you refused my suit did I intend to act as I have done by you. No man nor woman, no code of honour, nothing in life or death, has counted for me against gaining you, and, by God, woman, I would have forced you to love me against your hate!”

Miriam did not reply. He rose and faced the Frenchwoman.

“ Have I satisfied you, madame?” he enquired.

“ I will be satisfy,” she answered quietly, “ if you do come now with me to M. Purling and tell him of the mistake which has led you all astray, this true tale which at last you have recount. Then we may, perhaps, keep your counsel. Will not that be so, Miriam?”

Miriam nodded dumbly. Through her heart and brain one tremendous pæan of thanksgiving had begun to sound to the exclusion of all else. Now that she knew Jehu to be still living, and all that her fervent love had painted him, personal revenge was to her but a Dead Sea fruit, and



with Jehu himself should rest the final decision. The supreme fact was that her husband still lived, moved, and was her own.

She raised her face presently from her hands to find herself alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was late before Robert Purling was free to leave his uncle's house for his own. Frosty stars shone down upon the city as he stepped into his sedan-chair and was borne rapidly homewards, and their radiance, gleaming faintly through the open sides of the chair, illumined an impassive profile which yielded to the chance observer no hint of the chaotic state of the mind behind its even lines.

He would have been glad to walk, but the dangers of the journey after dark to the sparsely built region of Piper's Ground were too many for a solitary foot-passenger. As he sat amid his escort of chairmen, footmen and link-boys his sickened brain recalled with distasteful clearness the crowded events of the afternoon and night. He saw himself once more led sheep-wise to his uncle's house by Madame de Nivers; heard their joint account to the startled old gentleman of Poole's deluded flight, from his early morning visit to Piper's Ground to the moment when Madame de Nivers had unconsciously exploded the whole bubble of their delusion. True to her

word she had not betrayed the real nature of his share in events, and Robert had to endure the spectacle of Mr. Purling, galvanized by excitement into wild activity, sending out to collect a dozen intimate friends from the four corners of the city to listen to this amazing tale of love and misfortune, the happy conclusion of which was celebrated with the best available dinner and much wine. Robert's hand still ached with the force of the goodwill which the company expressed to him for the devoted service which he had given to his friend. Presently the company adjourned to congratulate Poole's wife, accompanied by Mr. Purling, and the news filtered about that the shipowner intended to place a vessel at her disposal for an immediate voyage to her husband, and that a special messenger had already been dispatched to Dorchester to carry the wonderful tidings to Mrs. Lilian, in order that she might, if she wished to do so, join Miriam aboard ship when the vessel had travelled round the coast to Poole.

All this in the space of one afternoon. He had hazarded his all and saved nothing, not even a fragment of Miriam's respect, from the wreckage of his hopes. He entered his house with weary inelastic tread, dismissed curtly his hovering valet, undressed alone, and flung himself down to sleep if sleep might come.

He felt terribly cold, as though he were already a dead man laid out on his gaunt bedstead. Between the curtains of the windows glimmered the chill fore-glimpse of dawn, and he seemed once

again to feel the weight of Jehu Poole's great body seated on the foot of his bed, then, in the increasing light, to see his stricken face and dishevelled hair as he paced helplessly about the room. Time and place were alike haunted. Feeling that he could endure unoccupied wakefulness no longer Robert felt for his tinder-box, struck a light, drew on a thick dressing-gown, and went downstairs to his library. Here he roved absent-mindedly from shelf to shelf, pulling out volumes at random only to fling them aside unread, until he was roused by a shaft of rosy sunlight to the absurdity of his actions, when he fell to replacing his books with meticulous care. The task ended, fatigue seized him unexpectedly, he dropped into a deep chair, and slept uneasily. He was roused from rest by the entrance and startled flight of a maid-servant with a duster and a couple of brooms, and rose stiffly to his feet. The cold of the night seemed to have penetrated to his bones, but a hot breakfast and the attentions of his man restored to him something of his lost self-confidence, and as he ate and drank by the side of a welcome fire he began to think consecutively of the future which was unrolling its grey length before him, and to form a plan of action. England, he decided, would be no longer tolerable. He would resume his travels in Italy and the Continent until he found some spot where sunshine and literary wealth could combine to make life endurable. There he would settle down to end his days. He thought of David Dane, but the idea of revenge

taken upon so wretched a creature offered him no satisfaction; moreover Madame de Nivers had undertaken to secure his silence, and any act of vengeance would assuredly react on himself. A frantic longing gripped him to leave London at once, and with it an impulse to leave his character to take care of itself, should Mme. de Nivers choose to speak as the result of his hasty flight. Warmed, fed, and with recovered sanity, he laid his plans with his old coolness of method, and gradually a twisted sense of humour took possession of him. Why not "die," after the manner of Jehu Poole?

On a misty November evening Mr. Robert Purling wandered down to the river by Millbank and casually hired a boat to carry him over to the further side. To the waterman, with whom he was well acquainted, he remarked that he would prefer to row himself over, and would return and restore the boat within the hour, a request with which many dealings with the same gentleman had made the boatman familiar. In a soft mingling of fog and dusk Robert Purling took his seat and the oars and pushed off, while the man returned to his work of cleaning another boat.

In midstream a heavily-laden sailing barge drifted slowly on her way downstream, and beneath the dark shadow of her side the accident must have occurred; for later a capsized pleasure-boat and a well-pulped laced hat were recovered by the agitated boatman with the aid of a boat-hook. The bargee had seen nothing, he de-

clared. Then he clinked a handful of coin in his pocket and took a suit of dingy canvas into the cabin for the service of the gentleman who sat within.

* * * * *

The "*Sunflower*," for once ignoring Plymouth harbour, had sailed up the Channel, round the Forelands and up the Thames with her latest cargo; had discharged it on Mr. Purling's wharf, taken her rest, and set about preparing again for sea when her owner bustled down to her with strange orders for the captain; to whom he rehearsed a tale so breath-taking that Captain Deal thoughtlessly poured himself out a second dose of Hollands without refilling his guest's glass, an omission which neither of them noticed. In three days' time the "*Sunflower*" sailed gallantly out of the river with Jehu's wife aboard her, while Jehu's daughter, too precious to run the gauntlet of the seas, remained behind in the care of the childless Madame de Nivers.

At Poole, escorted by William Quent, old Lilian came aboard, transformed, tremulous, but in manner as brusquely matter-of-fact as ever. Then once more the "*Sunflower*" turned seaward, and before the two anxious women lay the probable five weeks' voyage which was to bring them to the end of their tale of bereavement. With them came Dr. Bodlamb, mightily seasick but set in his determination to follow this romance through to its close, and presently obliged to forget his own sufferings for those of Lilian.

The old lady lay below in her restricted quarters, enduring her miseries in stoical silence, but before the ship had passed the Azores the doctor's expression of countenance had grown grave, and, metaphorically, he had taken off his coat in preparation for yet one more fight with Death. By good fortune Miriam proved herself to be a capital sailor, and between them they fought valiantly for the life of Jehu's foster-mother. In this they had a valuable ally in the patient herself, for Lilian had no intention of relinquishing her hold on life at the psychological moment in which it had begun to acquire value for her. She sustained her share of the indignant warfare with silent concentration of will, wasting no effort upon speech or action which could be avoided. She lay in the dim illumination from her porthole looking like a large-sized owl, bereft of feathers, upon whose bald pate someone had tied a frilled nightcap. Her large blue eyes stared back defiance into the face of Death, and refused, even under the inducements of bleedings and potions, to be dimmed. Finally the deadly sickness abated, and when the vessel crossed the Line into the tropics Captain Deal carried a shrunken bag of bones and parchment, which represented the body which still held Lilian's obstinate spirit, up on to the deck in quest of cooler air. Here she lay on an improvised bed, silent as ever, staring hopefully across the sea which still lay between her and the son of her desire. Captain Deal was well pleased. The voyage had so far been favourable, and he now told her cheer-

fully that, if all was well, they should reach Barbadoes some five days under the ship's usual record. For the first time Lilian Poole gave voice to the fear which had troubled her dauntless old heart.

"Then," she whispered faintly, "if us dinnot meet wi' no pirates I'll see my Jehu yet."

Miriam was worn with the strain of nursing under the difficult conditions of ship-board life, but she began to expand flower-like to the touch of those tropical nights and days. The heat washed all colour from her face and kept her quietly at her station beside the invalid, but her spirit began to shake off some of the shackles of her anxiety, the tense lines left mouth and forehead, and it seemed to her that the warm air was filled with the very voice and touch of her husband. Captain Deal was able to tell them much about the man whom he had known as James Perkins, who had so speedily become Mr. Clark's right-hand in all business transactions, and was now almost as well-known a figure in Bridgetown as the planter himself. The two tall men spent little of their time in society, and were neither popular nor unpopular, but by reason of their unusual physical size, they were objects of mild interest, and were pointed out to newcomers as a couple of prosperous eccentrics. Miriam eagerly drank in all that the captain had to tell her of Whitestones and its surroundings, and of the queer semi-English semi-tropical life of the place to which she was travelling. As the time of re-union drew nearer and nearer, until only

thirty-six hours longer of separation seemed likely to remain, the youth which had almost deserted her returned to her spirit with a rush, and she spent the best part of the day in choosing and preparing her gayest gown for the occasion. Old Lilian's silence became colossal. She seemed to be conserving all her remaining energy for the final meeting.

Delicately, her sails pearly in the flushed dawn, the "Sunflower" picked her way into harbour. Bridal in her loveliness she rose and fell daintily on the tide, and James Perkins, reining in his horse beside that of his employer as they reached the high land overlooking the property, sighted her, and pointed her out.

"Is not that the 'Sunflower,' sir?" he asked, shading his eyes from the brightness of the rising sun.

"I believe that is she," agreed the planter, after a prolonged stare. "She is back uncommon soon; I hope with no ill tidings."

By mutual consent the riders turned their horses' heads homeward, and as they rode downward through the spicy undergrowth Mr. Clark, who had been unwontedly silent throughout their early ride, abruptly broached the subject which lay nearest his heart.

"Perkins," he said lightly, touching his companion's sleeve, "we have passed close on eighteen months in each other's company without so much as the smallest of jars. I speak the truth when I tell you that never have I touched so congenial a spirit, and you have proved to me

that I am growing too old to manage this property single-handed. I have no direct heir, and my scapegrace young kinsman in England would neither love this place of mine nor value it for anything but the revenue that it might bring to him, and he has wealth enough and to spare already. If you would consider the offer it would be grateful to me to regard you as my present partner and future heir."

Jehu halted. Mr. Clark followed suit, and sat, smiling, while his manager fought for speech. Jehu loosened his neckcloth, while the hot blood burnt his cheeks and emotion battled with reserve. He had recently experienced his first touch of the island fever, and it had left him weak, less capable than usual of controlling himself. Moreover of late the memory of Miriam, of her kindling eyes and quick yet lingering hands, had followed him persistently through his days and nights, until the natural lover and poet, suppressed and fevering for expression of his misery, had all but dominated him. He choked, smiled crookedly, and stammered out a grateful but half-protesting acceptance of the planter's amazing kindness.

" You are generous above measure," he said, when his treacherous tongue was safely under control, " but consider better what it is that you propose to do before you make this offer into a legal obligation. For all that you know I am a criminal who has fled here from justice."

" My dear fellow," replied the planter airily, " I am damned if I care if you are!"

"But at least you are entitled to learn the truth of me."

"I have no desire to do so unless you have any personal reason for making the disclosure. I have not imparted to you *my* private history. Come. I cannot rub along without you, while you, so you once said, would have fared ill without the help which I was fortunate to be able to render to you. So we are mutually necessary, and beside, my good friend, I have the musician's natural affection for the poet."

"Eh? I beg your pardon, sir!"

The sugar-grower laughed, drawing a scrap of paper from his pocket.

"My dear fellow," he said, "when you write verses to your love of former years you should not suffer passing zephyrs to blow them along my colonnade to my feet if you do not wish me to read them. I observed you yesterday resting beneath the shade of my English Jasmine and inditing what I imagined to be a letter. You frowned, you sighed, you wrote, corrected, and re-wrote and I thought that you must be composing a reply to that exceedingly impertinent epistle from our London packers. Finally you gathered up your correspondence and the wind blew me this without your knowledge. I looked to see what suitable epithet you had found for our Porcine friends and instead I read this. Prisoner at the bar, what hast thou to say in thy defence?"

The crimson blood burnt painfully in the author's cheeks. He took the paper with a hand

that shook, and glanced down the first rough draft of the poem which, willy-nilly, he had composed to ease the intolerable longing of his heart. The words danced before his sight, eloquent witnesses of the failure of James Perkins to conquer and suppress Jehu Poole. He read them with a queer sensation as of studying the work of a dead man who had miraculously revived.

“ Thee have I worshipped, reading thee aright,
But thou through glass deceptively dost see,
Mistaking dross for gold and black for white,
Since thou hast stooped to kiss and honour me.

“ What right have I, recalling that pure kiss,
To love and court Remembrance that can be
Nought but my soul’s dishonour buying bliss?
But yet no oceans wash thy kiss from me !

“ Angelic Queen, true Lady lily-white,
My heart’s base by-ways mayest thou never see,
For I am King and Saint and Perfect Knight
Since thou didst kiss my soul and honour me.”

He refolded the paper without speaking, thrusting it into his pocket recklessly. Mr. Clark made apology.

“ Your pardon for my offence, Perkins. I fear that my thoughtlessness has given you pain.”

“ No, sir, the pain is of older standing, and it determines me that I must tell you the truth.”

“ Then wait until we have breakfasted. You are yet weak from your fever I can see, and it is ill to talk much on an empty belly.”

They breakfasted peacefully in the deep colonnade at the front of the house, speaking only of matters concerning the management of the estate

until the coloured servants had cleared away the remains of the meal. Then Jehu faced about in his chair, and prepared to rise to the first fence in the difficult course of his self-revealing. But their privacy was disturbed sharply by the grinding of coach-wheels on the coral drive, and in the next instant the vehicle itself came into sight, accompanied by two cavaliers. Mr. Clark rose to his feet, his back to Jehu, and advanced to meet his visitors. His companion, springing from his seat, stood with one hand pressed against the nearest pillar and every vestige of colour draining from his face.

The nearest horseman, a stoutish elderly man, dropped his rein on his steed's neck, scrambled with hasty indignity from his saddle to the ground, and ran violently up the steps of the porch.

“Your pardon, sir, your pardon for my behaviour! You are Mr. Clark? Yes, yes, Captain Deal here will explain. Jehu, my dear good beloved fellow! Jehu!”

“Doctor Bodlamb!”

“Wait, wait! Hold up, man, and listen to me. 'Tis all known, your mistake and that of that damned scoundrel young Purling. Miriam's with me, your wife by every law of God and man. She's getting out of the coach now with Mrs. Lilian. Hold up there. Why did you not tell me that he had been sick, sir, damn you, before you allowed me to rush upon him like this? Beg your pardon!”

Jehu straightened his swaying bulk, pushed the

excited Doctor ruthlessly on one side, and stepped forward. Curious rainbows of light played trickily along the shadowy colonnade before him, and against the brilliant background of hibiscus bloom, herself white-lipped yet glowing as a white-hot flower, stood Miriam Poole.

He plunged, dumbly, toward her, and in a flash the picture broke and she was running to meet him; but even as they met a strange bundle of clothing appeared to fall out of the coach through the Captain's outstretched arms, and came in pursuit of her on stumbling feet.

“My lad, my Jehu,” screamed Mrs. Lilian. “I be here too, I be. Us be coom arter 'ee. Us . . .” She fell headlong before the Captain could overtake her, and the Doctor reached her side just too late.

“She saw him, at least,” he muttered, a few minutes after, and drew Miriam gently away.

CHAPTER XXVII

“ PERKINS—I beg your pardon—Poole, remember that my offer always holds good. If you can persuade your wife to risk the dangers of another voyage and to bring the child, the deed of partnership is ready for completion. If not”—Mr. Clark paused and shrugged his shoulders slightly—“ you and yours are still my inheritors.”

“ Once again, a thousand thanks, sir. Perhaps when the child is older we will return, if I can persuade our old friend William Quent to accompany us.”

“ Excellent! All ashore, Captain? Then farewell to you all, and come back.” The planter retreated precipitately over the side of the vessel, and Miriam stood beside her husband watching regretfully the parting of boat and ship. There was undoubted pathos in the lonely aspect of the wearer of that silver-laced coat and bag wig seated opposite his negro boatmen.

Dr. Boblamb, already become green, had turned his back upon the last farewells. There was no Lilian to tend so anxiously. Jehu and his wife stood closer together as they watched the

fading shore. Then the full Atlantic lifted up the ship with boisterous affection, and visions of chalky Dorset cliffs began to rise before them out of the tropical sea. Jehu turned square to the wind, filling his nostrils with its vigour. Home-ward bound at last, homeward to the smooth, sheep bitten downs, to the dark panelled farm-house, above all, to London, to Murth, to the printers' ink of the Chapter coffee house, to the hundred and one blessed familiarities of his old life, of which he had never dared to dream until Miriam and the Doctor had brought them back to him. Two figures alone would be missing from the original daily round. Lilian, whose grave, awaiting its befitting monument of stone, was already covered with growths as quick and quiet as her own passionate love, and Robert Purling, commemorated by nothing more elaborate than a square slab of marble in a City church. Well, without a doubt Lilian was no longer hampered by crooked limbs and thwarted hope, and Robert, paying the price of his sins, must one day find peace.

But the voyage, as though to strike a balance with the excessive prosperity of the outward journey, was slow and difficult. Bad weather rushed to meet them off Bermuda, and they fought their way onward to the accompaniment of creaking timber and crashing earthenware. Nearly six weeks had gone by before the "Sun-flower" sailed wearily into the Channel, and Dr. Bodlamb, as he stood at last upon the firm quay of Poole harbour, dragged forth from the deeps

of his memory a quotation in the vilest of dog-Latin likening Oceanus to every inhabitant of hell. The whole party gladly left the vessel, bidding a kindly farewell to the Captain, whom they were to meet later in London, and once again the good smell of the Dorset Downs arose to greet Jehu Poole.

They drove silently on their homeward journey through the streets of the busy little port, leaving the Doctor behind them to recover from his tribulations with a night's repose at the inn. It was becoming dusk when the post-chaise rolled down the last slope above the farmhouse, and suddenly in the darkness of the carriage Jehu knew that his wife was weeping.

“O poor Lilian!” wept Miriam Poole. He felt for her and found her.

“Lilian knows,” he whispered reassuringly.

“Are you certain?”

“As certain as that we are alive ourselves.”

“I feel as though we ought to see her standing waiting in the doorway, as she used to do.”

The silence fell again, broken only by the sounds of their travel. Now they were down the hill and on the level road before the front gate, and the tall oaken door stood open to let them in. Miriam gave a strangled cry.

“O Jehu, who is that?”

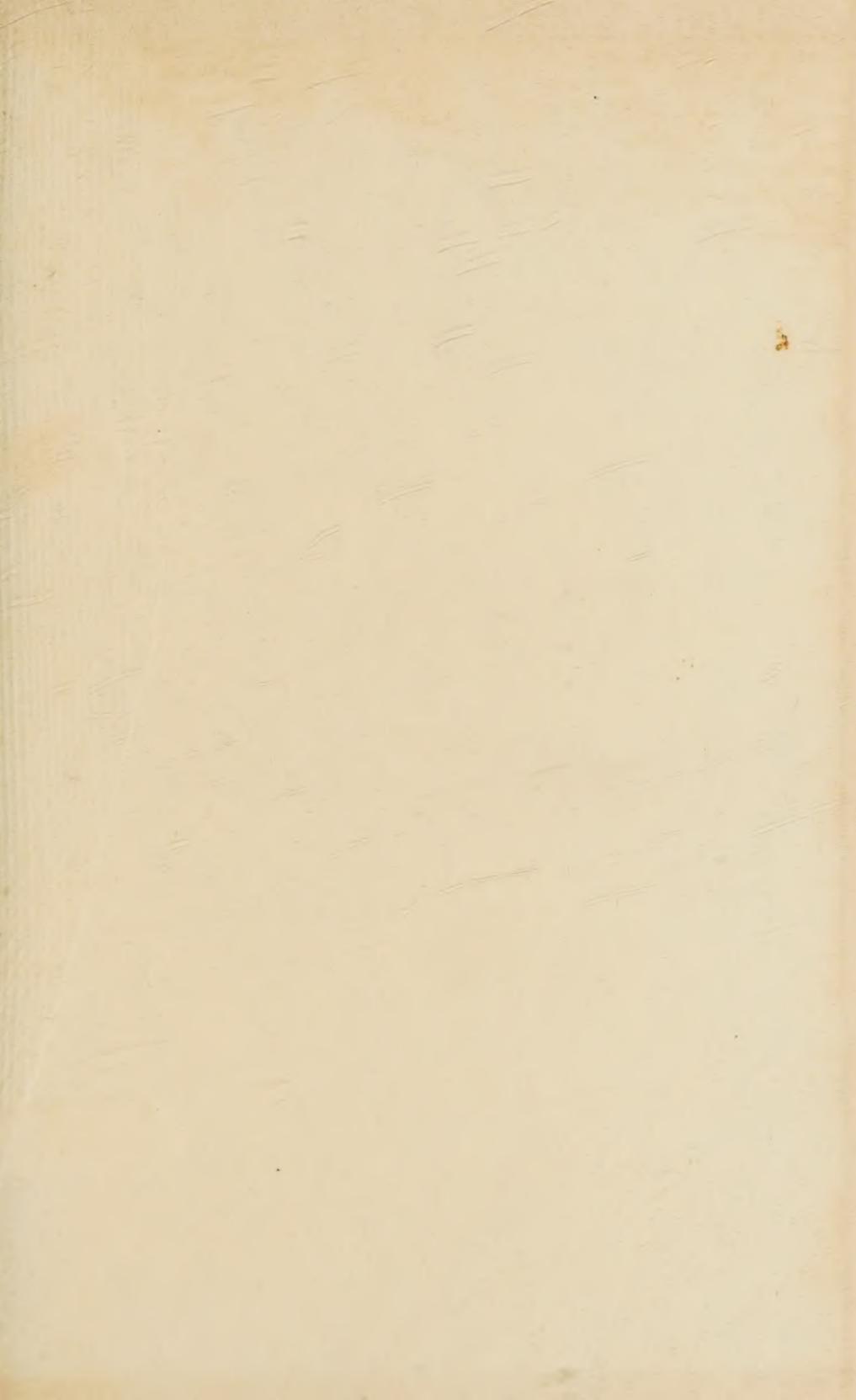
Silhouetted against a warm glow of light and framed in the heavy doorway stood a little woman with a child in her arms. “It is Madame de Nivers,” said Jehu, and scrambled out of the chaise.

William Quent's voice boomed out suddenly.

"I had thee message and bided here to meet 'ee," he called. "Lord God A'mighty, I be vair mad wi' joy! Jehu, ye gurt blunderin' old vule! Here be the French leddy; her've been bidin' here this three week expectin' of 'ee. Nay, lass, nay!" as Miriam stumbled blindly over the door-step with her arms held out for the child, "there's many a kiss yet vor thik' little'n, but only this one, arter all, vor me."

And the first lips which she touched across the threshold of her hard-won home were the lips of William Quent.

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